

鋼殻のレギオス II

サイレント・トーキ

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「お昼…
お弁当作ったから、
一緒に食べませんか?」



鋼のレギオスⅡ サイレンシント・トーキ



ニーナ・アントークと離れたくないのか？

（どうなのかな？）

自分でもよくわからない。

ニーナが呟き、レイフォンは考えを止めた。

「わたしたちは仲間なんだ。

だから、全員で強くなろう」



Prologue

The boisterous sound of a ringing bell echoed through the area.

The sound delivering the result.

The sound of judgment, dividing the winners and losers.

The signal of the end.

"....."

"....."

".....ah"

"....."

As Layfon stood, wordless, Sharnid made some silly noise and Felli sighed lightly. Nina heard all that through Felli's transmitter flakes.

Without a word, she accepted the truth, while the sound of the siren freed her from tension and excitement.

"This, this, this.....this is unexpected!! What a turn of events!!" The excited voice of the emcee echoed in the battlefield, and in turn, the howling of the audience became louder.

Forgetting the noise that seemed to swallow her, Nina stood still.

What did it mean to be strong?

Nina Antalk asked herself.

As the captain of the 17th platoon, Nina Antalk asked herself.

To be absolutely strong means not losing to anyone. In other words, it means to be the strongest.

If that was the case, then what was the existence of the strongest?

She searched through her memories, looking for the existence of the strongest. Different kinds of strong people surfaced in her mind.

The people she had met, the people she knew from books.....These people were valiant, strong.....but they were still far from being the strongest.

Even strong fighters had experienced failures. They matured through failures. As they went through a journey of failures in order to become stronger, then they weren't the strongest.

And half of those people reached the end of their lives through that journey.

Was it impossible for humans to be the strongest?

If so, then what does it mean to be the strongest?

Is the creature on the top of the food chain the strongest being? Those filth monsters?

If she kept on following this line of thought, then the world itself was probably the strongest. Leaving aside the food chain, all creatures managed to live only by standing on the stage this world provided.

And should the world change, the so-called food chain would be easily destroyed.

In fact, there had been a huge change in the world's distant past, before Nina's birth.

No records remained of how this happened, but the filth monsters appeared and conquered the Earth.

They spread across the world, destroying the ecosystem, turning the Earth into a barren place.

But was the Earth really the strongest existence in this world?

That was doubtful too.

Because humans still lived and survived in this world, despite its changed appearance.

Humanity lived in mobile cities that were isolated from the rest of the world. In other words, they created their own worlds. Wasn't this the proof of the strongest?

The other proof was the filth monsters.

When the ecosystems were destroyed and all plants and animals faced extinction, the filth monsters were born, making the pollutants their food.

Wasn't this the result of survival adaptation?

(.....I'm thinking too far.)

She abandoned her thoughts to watch the young man before her.

Here is a man who had defeated the filth monsters.

Layfon Alseif.

The new Military Arts student.

And he belonged to the 17th platoon.

The genius Military Artist who had obtained the title of the Heaven's Blade Receiver at Grendan.

To Nina, he was the closest to what could be the strongest existence, but.....

"Ah....."

Layfon lifted his gaze at the ringing of the bell and loosely lowered his sword. The two members of the 14th platoon that he had struck down moaned, and relaxed at the sound of the bell.

"Geez.....This is so tiring."

The captain of the 14th platoon lowered his weapon. The satisfied smile of someone who executed a successful plan blossomed on his face.

The broadcast was irritating to the ear. "Big turnabout! The 14th platoon's plan was successful against the newly formed platoon that had won the match against the 16th platoon. This time, the veteran team has turned around the result! They showed great teamwork that the new platoon lacks!!"

Teamwork.....

Nina turned around to look behind her, strengthening her vision through internal-type Kei, and saw the flag of her team had fallen. Over there, Sharnid shrugged as if surrendering. Nina resented herself for worrying about how people would have perceived his response.

"Well, that's how it is," the captain of the opposing team patted her shoulder.

"That guy's strong. He's strong.....But there's a way to handle him."

The murderous eyes of the captain during the match turned back into those of a senpai.

"This wasn't a one-on-one fight."

"Yeah....."

The exhaustion of not having tried her best loosens up her tension, and she lowered her shoulders.

"You still have lots of work to do to become strong."

The captain of the 14th platoon walked over to say a few words to Layfon, and then help his subordinates, who were still lying on the ground, get back to their base.

"Th.....Thank you!" Nina bowed to the back of the captain, fulfilling the etiquette required from a junior student.

She bit her lips as she gazed at the ground.

Chapter 1: Confusion

How've you been?

My school life's busy, but it's more ordinary than yours. After I got one of your letters, a few more reached me a few weeks after. I don't know when you'll receive this letter, but I hope it will reach you faster than yours reached me. I'm happy that you haven't given up the Military Arts. You've finally made a decision after going through a lot of trouble! I'd be embarrassed if you made up your mind because of my letter, but I'm still happy about that. I've made a new friend. It's tiring to be around that interesting person. This must be what they call pros and cons.

The orphanage is still full of noise and life. Father has left the dojo, but he's not teaching the kids at the orphanage; he's gone to teach in a real dojo. It's hard work to manage a dojo in Grendan, but people living nearby have enrolled, so we're making money. We plan to apply for government funding, so don't worry too much about the situation here. We're not getting as much money as we were when you were helping here, but I think we can manage.

So how are you doing over there? Are you sick? Have you been eating well? I'm worried. You never pay much attention to the nutrients in your diet.

It seems you've made a lot of friends. I'm relieved that you're not alone. But.....how come they're all girls?

That, I do mind.

Perhaps Layfon is a lecher?

That kinda thing makes me worried. I really should have protested more strongly about you going to Zuellni.

Ah, please take it as a joke. Right.

Oh yes, just to say, I'm happy that you haven't given up the Military Arts! But I don't want you to become the Layfon you were in Grendan. I envy the Layfon training with all his concentration on the Military Arts. You looked cool. But I didn't like the Layfon who became a Heaven's Blade Receiver. Do you understand the difference?

When the letter first came, there was this interesting topic. Maybe you'll be surprised, but I won't tell you just yet. It'd be great if it can surprise you a bit.

I'll write to you again.

To my dear Layfon Wolfstein Alseif.

Leerin Marfes.

.....Delicate fingers folded the letter along old folds. Praying that nobody would discover this, she put the letter back into the correct mailbox.



Forbidden from living on the polluted earth, humans lived in mobile cities.

As if floating on the earth, the cities move according to their own consciousnesses and maintained contact through the center of the traffic network, the Traffic City Joeldem.

The network wasn't reliable, but it was a way to connect them.

Academy City.

Within the ranks of the Regios were cities of different functions. This type of city, specializing in education, moved within this unstable network.

It gathered boys and girls, letting them study knowledge.

In here, where no adults set foot, children were learners and also teachers.

This was an Academy City.

And Zuellni was one of the Academy Cities.

Sunlight shot through into a classroom that was filled with a boisterous atmosphere before class began. The students entering the classroom placed their bags behind their seats and either joined into different conversation circles or prepared for class. Some ran about, asking for notes to copy. Some stayed immersed in their own world.

Surrendering to the urge to sleep, Layfon bent over his desk.

"Oh~~Morning!"

"*cough!"

The other person gave his back a heavy hit.

"What? What? You look tired!"

"*cough*! Uu.....Mor.....Morning....." Layfon coughed.

"Mi-chan, you went over the line."

"Yeah, maybe Layton still hasn't recovered from the match." Naruki said.

"Oh, wasn't that two days ago?"

Mifi puffed up her cheeks. "As if Layton would get tired just because of that. Right?"

"Yeah.....Uh, the match wasn't tiring. I'm ok."

".....But you look like you wanted to sleep."

"No, really, I'm fine."

Looking at Meishen's worried eyes, he nodded in a carefree manner. Her eyes were always teary. He didn't know what to do about that.

"Even so, you look tired. What is it? Did you have to work yesterday too?" Naruki studied him. Her tall presence made him feel like he was being interrogated.

"It's alright."

"I see. Well, working for days at a time can be tiring."

".....It's hard work to clean the Mechanism Chamber."

"Yeah. If you seriously want to prepare for the platoon matches, I think it's better for you to quit the cleaning job."

These three girls knew each other before they came to Zuellni.

Layfon met them because he stopped the riot at the opening ceremony.

And that was also the reason he was transferred into the Military Arts.

But these three had nothing to do with his transfer. The Student President, Karian Loss, knew from the beginning who Layfon was.

A Heaven's Blade Receiver in Grendan.

"No.....I'm getting used to cleaning there already," he said as he smiled at Meishen.

The cleaning job in the Central Mechanism – cleaning the heart of the Regios – Layfon really had gotten used to it. The repetitive body work was way more relaxing than using his brain.

"Then what is it?" Mifi asked.

"Ahhahahah.....Um, something." He gave a vague response.

".....Are you hiding something?"

"No. Definitely not!"

"No, you have a secret! Don't think this can escape my eyes! Hurry up and tell us before you get it!"

"Get it....."

Her pair of questioning eyes came closer. No one could stop Mifi when she was deep in her passion to collect and record any information.

"Tell, tell, tell....."

"Ah....." A troubled smile appeared on Layfon's face.

Naruki grabbed the back of Mifi's uniform and dragged her away.

"Didn't we have to tell him something? Class is about to begin."

"Huh?"

"Ah. That's right. Geez.....Because Mei-chi is always staggering, we almost forgot about it."

".....Is it my fault?" Meishen said, sulking.

"Well, Mi's always making a huge ruckus. Hurry up, Mei!"

".....Oh."

Naruki pushed Meishen. Meishen walked forward, facing Layfon, her face a fiery red.

".....Um....."

"Yes?" Layfon sat up.

".....Lunch.....I made a bento. Do you want to eat together?"

"Huh?"

"We're always eating out for lunch, so Mei's decided to make us a bento," Naruki said.

Meishen nodded at her, her face so red, it seemed like smoke was about to rise from her head.

It was true. Since his first day here, he'd always been buying bread for lunch. He had helped out in the orphanage so he knew how to cook, but because of his late shift in the Central Mechanism, he spent more time sleeping late in the morning.

"Ah.....Is that ok?"

".....Hmm."

"Mei-chi loves to cook. Just be thankful and accept her goodwill."

Wondering whether the continuously nodding Meishen was becoming a robot, Layfon smiled happily.

"Then, thank you."

Meishen stopped nodding.



"I'm jealous!" Harley said, after having listened to Layfon talk about Meishen's invitation to lunch. He was looking at the display.

"Thank's for the compliment," Layfon nodded, holding a green Dite with a wire connecting one of its ends to Harley's machine.

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Um.....?"

"Uh, I meant.....I also want a girlfriend!"

Layfon came to the training complex after for platoon training and was accosted by Harley to do some checking.

The intense sound of training in other rooms drifted past the walls and into the boys' ears.

Only Layfon and Harley were in the room.

"That's wrong! We aren't lovers! She just likes to cook."

Harley sighed and shook his head.

"Oh, that's right. What's this for?" Layfon had been sending his Kei into the sword.



There were two types of Kei, a destructive Kei that flowed externally and an internal Kei that strengthened the physical body. They were the skills that Military Artists used.

"Well, there's something I wanted to check."

"Um....." Layfon continued to extend his Kei into the blade, not knowing what he was doing it for. The sword emitted soft green light.

The vein of Kei made him feel like he'd grown a new limb. The vein extended into the blade to feel its heat and caressed the wind around it.

Harley sighed in admiration. "Your concentration of Kei is incredible! In this case, isn't it better to use a Platinum Dite? That'll increase the conductive rate."

"Really?"

Layfon was actually unsatisfied with it. It wasn't as good as the Heaven's Blade he'd used in Grendan.

(Now that I think about it, wasn't the Heaven's Blade also a Platinum Dite?)

But it was useless to compare the two. In the end, the sword was made to fight the filth monsters.

"So I was able to use the weapon before because of my amount of Kei."

Not long before, the filth monsters had attacked Zuellni.

Zuellni's multi-legs were trapped in a filth monster's nest. With Layfon's help that crisis has been resolved.

Harley had made a new adjustment to the Dite at Layfon's request.

A weapon that could be divided into countless wires.

Layfon used that to wipe out the larvae. He even stepped outside the city to eliminate the mother.

"But they took that weapon. Oh, this is fine."

The Student President and Vance had confiscated the weapon. It gave too much of an advantage to Layfon in a platoon match.

The Dite Layfon was now holding was newly made.

"Well, I didn't plan to use that weapon in the platoon matches anyway."

He cut off his Kei flow and lowered the sword. The residual heat from his Kei remained in his body, making him sweat.

"Really? If you used that, it would've been easy to win a platoon match."

"True, but isn't it pointless to win through that method?"

"Really?"

"Yes. Besides, the captain would never approve of it."

"Ah, true, true." A sour smile appeared on Harley's face.

"She wouldn't be happy, winning through other people's strength."

"Yeah," Layfon nodded and swung the sword.

Having released so much Kei, he wanted to exercise his limbs.

It was a casual swing from high to low. The remaining Kei on the blade disappeared along with the scattering green light of the Dite.

He confirmed his body condition by swinging the sword, and while doing that, he adjusted his different moves.

Slowly swinging the sword again and again, focusing his attention to one single point. He no longer detected the color of Kei emitting from the blade. The feeling he had had till now, of the changes in his nerves, slowly extended to the outside, resulting in the feeling that Layfon was swinging the sword like a machine.

And as he concentrated more, even that robotic feeling was pushed outside of his consciousness. He had become empty, whereas everything else was painted with color.

He swung at that color.

The point of his blade tore a track through the intangible air. This action repeated itself again and again. No matter how many wounds blossomed in the air, more air rushed in to fill it. He repeated his motion, and only stopped when the wound, affecting the flow of air, was unable to recover.

Unenthusiastic clapping sounded.

"Ha ha, brilliant!"

Sharnid had been watching at the door.

"Seems like it's been cut up to so many pieces that it just died."

"It's not that incredible....."

"But it really is! The wind pressure was strong when you first swung your sword, but in that last swing, the wind pressure just vanished.....It was amazing," Harley said excitedly.

Layfon scratched his head, embarrassed by Harley's child-like excitement.

Then Sharnid poured cold water on Harley's emotion. "Harley, have you finished what I asked for before?"

"Oh, yes, yes. It's already done."

Harley opened a box beside him and took out two Dites.

The two Dites were like rods of charcoal. They had curved handles that were smooth and polished. In the bend of the handles were metal rings, hiding a hook like thing.

"Are they guns?"

Sharnid's job was to support the team with long range fire.

"It won't do to only snipe when we have so few fighters on our team. Just think of it as insurance," Sharnid said. He used his Kei to restore the Dites.

"What a crude appearance!"

The body of the gun looked very heavy. There were no blades extending from above and below, but the shape looked sharp. The gun was designed with several bulging points. Either way, it looked like some type of attacking weapon.

And Layfon could tell the texture was not of Lithium Dite, but the hard Chrome Dite.

The same material of the captain, Nina's iron whips.

"I used black Dites as requested, but the shooting range isn't as long because of the bad conductive rate for the Kei flow."

"Not bad. I don't plan to shoot long distance with this thing. As long as it can hit anyone within ten Mei, it's fine with me."

He placed his fingers on the triggers, practicing with his new Dites. He reversed the gun barrels.

"Is this close-quarters gun combat?"

Sharnid whistled. "As expected of someone from Grendan. You do know a lot."

"Ah, I think even people not from Grendan would know....."

"What is close-quarters gun combat?" Harley asked.

To put it simply, this was martial arts using guns. Guns had the advantage with long range combat, but compared with swords and daggers, they were slow in terms of close-quarters combat.

And so a new type of gun skill was invented to overcome this weakness. The skill of close-quarters gun combat.

"Ah.....Sharnid senpai knows how to use it?"

"Well, people who know how to use this are either stupid people that try to look cool, or amazing fighters.....And I'm the former," he said with a cunning smile.

Not sure whether Sharnid was speaking the truth or not, Layfon looked at Harley, who only shrugged.

".....I'm late."

Came the clear and small voice. It was Felli.

Her form was as exquisite as glass art, giving off a pressure as if to freeze everything in her vicinity, but Layfon and the guys were already used to this.

"Felli-chan's cute today too," Sharnid commented.

"Thanks....." She glanced at the guns in his hand, and sat down on the long bench in a corner, already losing interest.

Harley checked Felli's Dite and said "Nina's the only one not here."

"Meaning she's the last!"

"Seems so."

Nina was more determined than anyone to strengthen the 17th platoon. She was always the first to arrive for training, but today, she hadn't shown up yet.

"I remember her saying she had something to do....."

"I think she's not keen at all," Sharnid yawned.

And just as he said, a lazy atmosphere filled the room.

Not knowing what to say, Layfon gazed at his sword.

(A lot has happened after the match.)

Revealing his real strength in the first platoon match was a setback for Nina.

This time, he kept himself at the same level as the rest of the platoon and fought seriously.

But in the end, they lost the match.

He didn't do his best. It was meaningless to hide his strength anymore, and he agreed with Nina that they had to protect the city. Even so, he tried to fight with some will.

And the reason for his not giving his all in the fight was because the platoon match wasn't the real Military Arts competition.

Layfon's strength would be needed after the platoon matches.

At some time, mobile cities would approach nearby cities and fight for territory.

In reality, it was the people living in the city who fought.

And warred.

The reason behind the fight was the fuel source for the Regios – selenium mines.

For some reason, a city would only fight against the same kind of city. To reduce the number of casualties, Academy Cities had introduced the Military Arts competition. But even so, this couldn't change the reality that the losing city might die.

Zuellni once had three selenium mines. When Layfon came to study, it only had one mine left.

If they lost in the next Military Arts competition, Zuellni would have lost its one and only mine, and face death.

At first, Layfon didn't understand what this had to do with him. He felt it was unfair, for he had already decided to give up Military Arts.

Despite that, it didn't feel bad to do what he could for the city.

But.....

One of the key people who changed his way of thinking, Nina, was not happy.

Against her parents' wishes, Nina ran away from home and came to Zuellni – Without money, she had to work in the Core Mechanism.

Layfon was also half-studying and half-working.

He always bumped into her at work. Recently, they'd earned the trust of their supervisor and were assigned together to clean a larger area.

Layfon had been working from midnight till dawn beside the wordless Nina.

(This is tiring.....)

Thinking back, he felt he had never been through such a long night. Anyone could see the unhappiness on her face.

(Is it really because we lost the match?) He thought.

But if he was the cause.....That part he didn't understand.

Speaking of which.....

(Shouldn't I speak with her?)

He was being indecisive about it. And time passed as he brooded.

"If there's no practice, can I go back?" Felli said listlessly.

"Just wait a little bit more!" Harley said. He had already finished checking her Dite, and he had nothing to do. Sharnid was leaning against the wall with eyes closed. Perhaps he really was sleeping. Felli squinted at Layfon beneath her long eyelashes, her sharp gaze reproaching him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Nina's voice saved him from Felli's sharp gaze.

Nina was in her third year, a junior, but she had become the captain of a platoon.

"You really are slow, Nina. What've you been doing? I almost fell asleep!" Sharnid yawned. To him, a fourth year, Nina was younger, so he didn't call her captain.

"I had to look into something, and it took some time." She walked to the center of the training room. The Dites in her harness gave off metallic noise as she moved.

Doubt rose in Layfon.

The sound that was usually reliable and convincing now felt unnatural.

The sound of the Dites...showed she wasn't walking normally.

Nina might have sustained wounds in the previous match, but she didn't look injured. She didn't walk carefully so as not to jar a wound.

"It's late. We won't be training today."

"Why?"

Everyone was shocked. Even Felli widened her beautiful eyes, watching Nina with suspicion.

Layfon felt the same.

Nina formed a platoon to give something back to Zuellni. It was because of her passion that he felt it was okay for him to step back onto the path of Military Arts. And it wasn't just her. Meishen, Mifi, Naruki...They followed their dreams with an honest heart.

Even though the thing that really encouraged him was the letter from his childhood friend, Leerin.

"So, why?" Sharnid said.

Layfon wasn't just surprised at her canceling the training, but today's Nina seemed to lack something. Just like the sound coming off the Dites in her harness. Something he couldn't quite grasp.....

"I'm thinking of changing the training method. Sorry, we'll just cancel today's training."

"Sure....."

"Go do individual training if you want. Dismissed."

She left the training room.

Layfon watched her back.

The two Dites bumped against each other.

It really was an uneasy sound.



She realized this when she was panting heavily and had to stop. She pressed her palm against her chest, just above her heart, and realized that feeling of coarseness was gone.

"Heh?"

She searched in the pockets of her uniform. The breast pocket, inside pocket, dress pocket, her schoolbag.

It was gone.

The letter she was supposed to give to Layfon was gone.

It was still on her when she left the classroom. She had wanted to give it to him in the room, but while she hesitated and tried to find an opening, he had left. Meishen chased after him, to the training complex, but as a General Studies student she wasn't sure whether she should enter the building, so she could only wait at the entrance.

(I can give it to him tomorrow.....Isn't it better to hand it over now? Should I go in? Would I be interrupting? Should I just wait here till he finishes training.....?)

She couldn't wait for long, as it was almost time for her shift at the coffee shop.

She had checked that she still had the letter while thinking outside the training complex.

She'd had the letter then.

While checking to be sure that the letter really wasn't on her, she couldn't help but think what would happen next.

That letter had been stuffed into the crack between the door and the wall with other letters at the dormitory. Besides the letter from her parents, she also found letters from close relatives and friends – and when Meishen was happily checking the names on the letters, she found this name.

Leerin Marfes.

A name she hadn't heard of before. She checked the name of the receiver, and held her breath.

It was Layfon.

She realized that the letter must have been delivered to the wrong place. She and Layfon lived in different dormitories with different room numbers. This letter was mistakenly delivered to her room by some coincidence.

Thinking of this, she was glad that she got to chat with Layfon. She could always talk to him, but it was another thing to talk about serious matters.

But.....

(Leerin.....This is a girl's name, right?)

If only she could ignore this name and stay immersed in happiness.

(What is their relationship? Friends?.....What if they're lovers?)

Uneasiness filled her chest.

(.....But, to peek into another person's letter.....)

Her fingers shook. Looking at someone else's letter wasn't worth praising.

(But.....)

She really did mind it. If this Leerin was someone important to Layfon, then what about Meishen herself?

She was afraid, thinking that the truth could be written in this letter. Even if she just left the letter alone, she'd probably have insomnia.

(No.....But.....But.....)

Shaky fingers lightly touched the covering of the envelop. She mustn't peel it off too obviously. Lightly, lightly.....

(Ahah.....)

And she read what was inside.

What she felt afterwards were a sense of self-hatred and rivalry.

She relaxed, knowing she herself was the only one looking after Layfon's diet. Yet at the same time, she was jealous of the time that Layfon had spent with Leerin.

The guilt and self-hatred of peeking into another's letter stayed with Meishen. She had decided to give him back the letter when she was making him a bento. She had wanted to, but somehow dragged it out till after school.....

.....And now this had happened.

".....But it was there earlier."

She wanted to cry, her eyes feeling hot and her body weak. She sat down on the ground, hugging her schoolbag and searched in her memories for a hint.

".....Oh!"

Perhaps.....

Because 'she' had appeared before Meishen, who was determined to stand outside the complex and wait for Layfon. She didn't mind being late to her job at the coffee shop, since this was her fault. But when Meishen had worked up her courage, 'she' appeared.

Felli Loss.

Hearing Felli's question, asking what Meishen wanted with Layfon, the determination Meishen held vanished like a puff of smoke, and she ran off as if she was escaping.

She must have dropped the letter then.

"Uuuu....."

She could do nothing without Naruki and Mifi. She hated herself for getting nervous before unfamiliar people. Once again, she returned to the training complex, searching for the letter on the ground – and failed to find it.



"I find it strange," Felli murmured in incomprehension as she went home.

Nobody felt like training after Nina left, so they just dispersed. Sharnid left immediately to go somewhere, and Harley went back to his lab after saying to Layfon "I'll find you if something comes up."

Layfon and Felli ended up leaving together, as their dormitories lay in the same direction.

Felli was one year older than Layfon, but she looked like a girl just a little over 10 years of age.

"She actually suggested we cancel training. This doesn't feel right."

Layfon smiled sourly at her.

"What?"

".....Nothing. Senpai's worried about the captain, so....." He smiled. Felli glared at him, her pale face turning pink.

Felli's level of psychokinesis was of the level of a genius, but she hated to use it. She was in the 17th platoon because her brother Karian Loss, the Student President, forced her into it.

"As if I'd worry about her," she said.

"I meant that her coming up with weird ideas doesn't feel right."

Felli increased her pace, her argent hair fluttering behind her.

The male students walking past the pair couldn't help but stop and look at her.

Layfon caught up with her, walking past the dreamy-eyed male students. "But, it really is strange."

Even if she were changing the training methods, there was no need to cancel today's session.

(It was more like she was distracted by something else.)

That's what Layfon thought.

However, he didn't know what it was.

He remembered Nina's attitude at work last night.

A cold expression coupled with silence. Was it really because they lost the match?

Perhaps she was thinking of something else.

"But I still don't get it."

"Are you still thinking?" Felli said, angrily. "Please slow down."

"Oh, sorry." He had sped up his pace unconsciously.

The Felli he knew now always had some sort of expression on her face. This was different from when he first met her. Neutral. A face like a doll's.

"You won't find the answer by thinking too much. All you need is to observe more keenly."

"True," he nodded.

"Compared to that....."

"What?"

"Nothing." Her lips moved, then, clamped down altogether.

"?"

"My brother.....wants you."

"The Student President needs me?" Layfon frowned.

Knowing Layfon's past, Karian had forced him into the Military Arts department.

"I wasn't told why, but he said it's important."

Felli was also unhappy.

"Shall we go and meet him?"

Why didn't she just tell him at school?

"No," she shook her head.

"He said it's secret.....We'll talk at my place."

".....What?"

"I need to buy groceries for dinner. Please come with me."

Why Felli's place?

Before he could ask that question, she had strolled ahead of him.

He followed silently.

And now he was holding shopping bags in both of his hands.

(Just how many days of groceries has she bought?)

Felli was also walking with her hands full.

Instead of parting at the usual place, they headed for Felli's dormitory. Layfon felt uneasy walking in an unfamiliar part of the city.

".....It looks big."

It looked more like a villa than a dormitory. On the first floor was a big living room enclosed in glass walls. A spiral staircase (next to the sofa) took them up to the second floor.

Layfon clearly felt the gap between the rich and poor as he pushed open the engraved door.

It was too naive of him to get so excited over having a twin room all to himself.

A wide corridor stretched ahead to another spacious living room, and from there was a door that led to more rooms.

"Please leave the groceries over there."

The kitchen was about the same size as Layfon's room. He didn't know whether to feel comforted or disappointed by this.

"Please wait outside. I'm going to make dinner."

Layfon put down the groceries and went to sit on the sofa in the living room. A desk, a magazine bookcase...Small oil paintings adorned the walls, looking as if they were just put up to have something cover the bare walls. The room felt dry and tasteless.

There were actually two doors leading from the living room.

One of the doors must lead to Felli's room.

Then the other.....?

(I see. She lives with the Student President.)

This wasn't surprising, since they were siblings.

(So why does this meeting have to be a secret?)

The Student President had somehow obtained information about Layfon's past, but the two of them weren't close enough to share each other's secrets.

In truth, Layfon didn't want to meet Karian.

(Well, there's no point in thinking about it. I'll find out soon enough,) he decided, recalling Felli's advice.

With nothing to do, he listened to the noise coming from the kitchen.

The sound of sorting out the groceries was replaced by the sound of chopping.....

Doh.....Doh.....Doh.....

The sound.....

Dohdoh.....Doh.....

Doh.....Dohdoh.....Doh.....

"Woah!" Layfon called at the irregular sound, and went over to the kitchen.

"Senpai.....What're you doing....."

"Don't.....talk to me."



With a serious facial expression, she fought the potato seriously with a knife in her hand. Felli held down the uneven, round potato on the chopping board with the tip of her trembling fingers, and slowly cut it in half. Sliced taro filled the salad bowl beside her.

"Senpai....."

".....What?" She hadn't looked at him.

"Do you know how to cook?"

"Of.....Of course."

"Of course," he smiled, nodding.

".....What?" she finally turned to him, her forehead adorned with droplets of sweat.

He smiled again. He wanted to laugh, but suppressed it.

"Wh...What is it?"

He could only laugh.

But he couldn't laugh to her face.

"Well. I have a suggestion."

"And what is it?"

"It'll be easier to cut the rest if you peel the skin off first."

Her eyes widened.

He didn't mean to hurt her dignity. All he wanted to do was give some advice, but he still wanted the food to be edible. No. He wasn't thinking of using another's kitchen and showing off his skill at cooking.....

"Mm.....This is delicious," Karian nodded with satisfaction, chewing the chicken and taro cooked in tomato sauce.

"Ah.....Thanks," Layfon said, embarrassed.

"....."

Felli ate the food with disapproval.

".....What?"

"No-nothing."

".....This is delicious."

".....Thanks."

In the end, Layfon made the dinner.

Because there was too much potato in the salad bowl, he used the potato to make another dish – one with mushrooms, chicken fillets and cream. They had plenty of ingredients to choose from. Next came the bread.

And that was their dinner.

"And I was thinking of eating dinner together at a nearby restaurant.....It's been a while since I've had a home-cooked meal. I'm really grateful."

Karian made a happy face.

"Aaaa.....Um, but it's a shame this is a guy's cooking." Layfon sighed.

"It's enough that you know how to cook! Do you like cooking?" Karian asked.

"Not really.....Everyone had to help out back at the orphanage."

"Oh, I see."

Layfon didn't know his parents. The Head of the orphanage picked him up when he was little. The Head was a Military Artist, and the person who discovered Layfon's talent.

"I'm envious of your cooking skill. I wanted to learn how to cook after coming here, but it's beyond my ability."

Whether or not this was taken at face value, the idea that this brother and sister pair was unable to do something necessary to survive was alien to Layfon.

"And what did you want to talk about....."

"Oh, we can leave that for later. I want to enjoy the food."

"Ah....."

Layfon wanted to finish what he came for and get out of here. Felli sat eating her food in a foul mood.

Karian also noticed her mood, but he did nothing about it.

(Anyway, just finish dinner!) And Layfon concentrated on eating.

After dinner, Felli picked up the dishes and made tea for Layfon and her brother in the living room. The tea smelled nice. Felli seemed to have used some high class tea leaves.

"I want to show you this....." Karian said, giving Layfon no time to enjoy the tea. He took out a photo from a folder.

"I realized from the last attack on Zuellni that I had to have a bigger budget set aside for the city's defense."

"That's a good idea."

Karian must have realized this since Zuellni hadn't encountered filth monsters for a long time.

Zuellni was a peaceful city.

The city was populated entirely by students, so even the Electronic Fairy itself hadn't been paying attention to the possibility of filth monsters nearby.

It sounded amazing that a city was run by students, but to put it in a worse light, it was a city full of immature youngsters.

"Thanks. So I've been sending off drones since then, and this image came back....."

A bad quality image. Everything was blurred.

This was due to the pollutants in the air, affecting any long range wireless communication. Somehow, only psychokinesis worked well for long-range transmitting, but it was still not possible to establish contact between cities.

This image had nothing to do with psychokinesis.

"It's hard to make out, but the location of this image is a mountain about 500 Kimel ahead of Zuellni's current position."

Karian traced his fingers around a shape in the mountains, so Layfon could finally see it.

"What I'm worried about is this area of mountain here."

"What do you think?"

Layfon studied the image for some time. Then he placed it back on the desk and rubbed his tired eyes.

Felli stood to the side, looking at the photo.

"How is it?"

"I fear the same."

"Hmm....." Karian leaned back on the sofa, troubled.

"What is this?" Felli asked.

"A filth monster."

She glared at her brother. "Are you planning to use him again?"

"Relying on him is the only way we can survive," he replied calmly.

"What's the point of having a Military Arts course!?"

"The true strength of Military Arts, Felli.....You should understand now, thanks to what happened recently."

"But....."

"Even I want him to focus just on the Military Arts competition, but this is an emergency. There's no helping it. Then, what do you think?"

Karian's finger pressed on the image of the filth monster.

"It's probably a male. Compared to the size of this mountain, the filth monster's either in its first or second phase."

Newly born filth monsters were asexual – not male nor female. After a larva molted, it was a male. It absorbed pollutants from the air and went about searching for prey.....Humans. Molting was measured in phases. The more it molted, the stronger it became. And as it approached the mating season, the male molted one more time to become female. A gravid (pregnant) female. It then buried itself beneath the ground and hibernated until the eggs hatched.

"The city I was born in hadn't come across any filth monsters for a long time, so I can't really tell how strong this is. You?"

"A filth monster in its first or second phase isn't that horrible, but that's when it isn't attacking a city."

"Um....."

"Almost all of the filth monsters enter their reproductive stage in their third to fifth phase. The most terrible are filth monsters who've given up on reproducing. They grow stronger as time passes."

"Have you beaten one of these monsters?"

"With two other people. At the time, I thought I was going to die."

The Loss siblings took a deep breath at that. Layfon observed their reaction without much of an emotion.

After dinner, he left the dormitory.

"Do you hate him?"

"You've asked me that before."

His muscles froze in the middle of the staircase.

While Felli listened, Layfon answered with a wry smile.

"I'm not joking."

"I know."

"Very few people know you were a Heaven's Blade Receiver in Grendan. My brother doesn't plan to spread it around, so you can just ignore his request."

Almost no one knew it was Layfon who had defeated the attacking filth monsters.

The few who knew were Karian, Vance, and the members of the 17th platoon.

Not many people outside of Grendan knew about the Heaven's Blade Receivers. But even now, matches for the Heaven's Blade title were being

fought fiercely in Grendan. People fought filth monsters and each other for the title of the strongest twelve.

"That can't be announced casually."

The Queen of Grendan took away Layfon's title as a Heaven's Blade Receiver because he had tainted its name.

If everyone knew about his title, then they'd all know of his shameful past.

So he'd keep this a secret.

"Why didn't you say you don't want to do this? Don't you want to give up Military Arts?"

"I want to, but right now....."

"Then why?"

"In the end, the filth monsters are the same as the Military Arts competition. Isn't that so?" he replied, a bit surprised by how calm his voice was.

"You're an idiot!"

"Ah, that's too much."

"You really are an idiot," Felli repeated in a small voice.

He shrugged.

Chapter 2: What can be done

Kei was a flowing energy inside of every human being.

"Blood" flow sent signals through the nervous system. It flowed through the bone marrow.....It was like a network of thoughts, and amidst all the flowing energies was one called Kei.

Certain people were born with the ability to create a huge amount of Kei. On a certain level, one could view it as redundant energy produced by the phenomenon called life. Kei could strengthen the body or destroy things outside the body.

Did this new human ability evolve to ensure the survival of mankind in this polluted world? Or was this the evidence that pollutants were slowly invading the human body.....?

Humans called this power Heaven's Blessing. They treasured it and respected it.

The flow of Kei created the Military Arts. It took a long time to pass down and spread this skill through the cities in the world. And in the intervening time, many cities fell prey to the filth monsters.

"Fu!"

The sound of a breath being let out brushed past his ears. Layfon pulled back his stance to respond to that breath.

And the sole of a shoe suddenly appeared before him.

"Wa....."

He bent forward, and the kick went over his head. His opponent changed tactics and swung down towards Layfon's back with the foot. In a flash, Layfon's left hand shot upward to grab the foot, his right hand already pressing down his opponent's chest, and he kicked out at his opponent's other leg.

"Wha....."

Red hair scattered. His opponent fell onto the mat on her back.

Amazement at the action echoed throughout the gymnasium.

"Are you all right?" Layfon extended his hand to his opponent.

"I thought I almost got you!"

"Yeah, almost."

"That's like praise, coming from you! You just increased your speed to avoid my kick, right? I lost because of that!"

Naruki combed her hair with her fingers. A cunning smile appeared on her face. "Speaking of which, Layton.....Have you forgotten I'm a girl?"

"Huh?" Then he remembered how he had pressed his hand down on her chest.

"Yes, I admit my breasts aren't big, but for you not to have felt it.....It makes me feel a bit....." She glowered at him.

"Ah, no.....I didn't mean that! My body just moved on its own....." He explained. Speaking of which, it was a shame he couldn't feel that softness - NO NO NO! How could he think like that.....

Naruki smiled. "I was just joking."

"That's.....That's mean....."

"Ah, you gotta pay the price for touching a girl's breast. That's the etiquette for being a man."

"Really?"

"Yes. Besides, I don't want to be touched so easily....." she said, scanning the sports hall.

He followed her gaze.

This was the class for martial arts. Most of the first-year students had been kicked flying and were lying on the floor. Thunderous noise filled the hall. Their sparring partners were all third-year students. As expected, none of the first-year students were winning.

Layfon was in first-year but was also a platoon member. Nobody wanted to spar with him, so he was paired up with Naruki.

"Has the captain of your platoon got some kind of problem?"

The two of them were watching Nina. Nina calmly fought the two first-year students she was facing.

"Does she look like that to you?"

"Yes. As if her heart's somewhere else."

"Yeah."

Layfon also thought so.

"Do you know something?"

"We had a match recently."

"Aha.....Losing a match can be shocking."

Almost all of the platoon captains were in their fourth year, but Nina was a third-year. She obtained permission to form a platoon because of her excellent skill, but that wasn't all that she wanted to do. She wanted to save Zuellni through her own strength.

In other words, she wanted to win in the next Military Arts competition. Therefore, losing a match must have been a huge blow to her.....

"Um..." Even though that was how he thought.....

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No. That's what I think....."

But he felt that wasn't the real reason. Things weren't as simple as he thought they were.

"Hey, you over there! Practice seriously!"

"Ah, sorry!" Layfon apologized automatically to the three third-year students. Behind those three were other first-year students, watching Layfon with curious glances. As for the three third-year students.....

"What is it?" Naruki asked.

"He's the trump card of the 17th platoon, right?" one of them said without glancing at her. All three were watching Layfon with challenging gazes.

"Um....." Layfon replied listlessly. "Do you want something from me.....All three at once?"

"Um....." A hostile and provoking attitude.....Hiding in it was jealousy.

Layfon was used to the negative emotion currently hanging in the air. It was a normal event for him, like eating meals everyday. He had encountered this sort of scene before and after he became a Heaven's Blade Receiver in Grendan.

This was an older person's contemptuous attitude towards his junior.....And his jealousy at having a kid be better than him.

"I'm fine with it."

"Layton.....?" Naruki said in amazement. "You don't have a sword though. Is that okay too?"

One of the three students giggled.

"No problem. It's natural not to use a sword in a martial arts class."

"Aren't you a bit conceited?"

"This is not conceit. Besides, it's just a class."

"That's being conceited."

That male student had reached his limit.

Layfon felt an growing gap between his words and feelings. He responded lightly to the provokers, as if he was a robot. He didn't think the situation would improve if he said anything else, so he decided to accept the challenge.

But he didn't think accepting the challenge would improve the situation either.

"I'm not conceited. This is the truth," he said anyway.

".....I see."

The observing crowd turned angry. They watched the three third-year students move to Layfon from three different directions.

Layfon didn't take a stance. He took a step back so he could see all three of his opponents.

"Well then....." As the person directly facing Layfon muttered, the two students rushed in from the side.

"Let's go!"

Strengthening their bodies through Internal-type Kei, they attacked Layfon with fists and feet.

The bullet-like fist and scythe-like kick didn't hit Layfon.

"Huh?!"

They searched for him.

Layfon was in the air.

He turned in midair and kicked off at the steel beam on the ceiling to descend at unbelievable speed. A loud noise from the mat on the floor confirmed his position right behind the student in the center.

"What!"

His surprised face was inches from Layfon's. Layfon stood up.

"Wu-!"

His fist found the chest of his surprised opponent. Ignoring the third-year student he had defeated, he faced the other two.

The other two third-year students turned back at the noise and saw their friend lying on the floor.

Layfon still hadn't taken a stance. He stood, stoic, paying no attention to the student he had just taken out, his gaze sweeping through the other two students.

And in that one swift moment, he disappeared.

It looked as if he disappeared. In fact, the other two third-year students couldn't keep up with his movement.

In the silence of a light breeze, Layfon moved swiftly to the two opponents and repeated his attack, burying his fist into their chests.

"Arrr!"

"Whu!"

The two students toppled.

Joyful shouts erupted from the group of first year students.

Layfon let out a breath to soften his blank expression.



"I don't think you should've done that."

"Hmm?"

He was gratefully eating Meishen's bento and listening to Mifi talk all by herself when suddenly, Naruki had spoken up.

They only had class in the morning, so the four of them went a bit further from the school today to the patio of a General Studies senpai's restaurant. The patio faced a freshwater lake that was used for agriculture.

They ordered the cheapest juice from the restaurant and took out Meishen's sandwiches from the basket.

It was refreshing to appreciate the lake while eating. Layfon saw a field of fruit trees on the other side of the lake, and more fields for the agricultural major. There weren't any tall buildings anywhere. The sky looked like it merged with the trees.

"I mean your attitude back in the gymnasium," Naruki clarified.

"Oh....."

"Huh? What's that?"

Mifi had started the conversation as she had gotten news of the incident and wanted Layfon and Naruki to give her more details.

"No matter what, they were just jealous."

"True. I'm not saying he should've lost deliberately to them because they were senpais, but I feel it would've been best to leave them some face."

Naruki didn't worry about other patrons overhearing. It was past lunch time, so there weren't many people in the restaurant.

"Hmm. For example?"

"For example, not taking on three people at once and fighting them one-on-one instead."

"Is that.....all?" But didn't he finish them one by one?

"They wouldn't have accepted it. Aren't they in a platoon too?" Mifi said.

Naruki nodded. "Perhaps they wouldn't have accepted it. But it would have looked better if the other three suggested to three-on-one fight. Now it looks like Layton's the bad guy."

"Oh....." Perhaps she was right.

"Layton might not care how other people perceive him, but this is troublesome for the friends around you," Naruki said. She then looked at Meishen.

".....I.....I don't really mind," Meishen waved her hand in negation.

"Ah, sorry. I didn't think about that."

"Well, I might seem harsh, but I just don't like people badmouthing my friends," Naruki said.

"Thanks," Layfon nodded his thanks.

"Never mind. It's not Layton's fault, so don't mind it."

".....Yeah, don't worry about it, Layton."

".....Thanks," Layfon said.

Face reddening, Meishen lowered her head.

But perhaps there was a problem with his attitude. Just as Naruki had said, Layfon didn't mind making enemies.....To the point that he had no interest in it at all. All he wanted was to end the fight as quickly as possible. He didn't care what consequences came from that.

That was the attitude he held.

Why did he have such an attitude?

There wasn't a need to ask that question.

Problems were never-ending.

Before he became a Heaven's Blade Receiver, he'd fought countless matches with people jealous of his talent. People challenged him. They felt they had been insulted because he was only a kid.

He was foolish to respond to them all seriously. From the very beginning, he had had no knowledge of Naruki's alternate method. Still, when he had grown up a little, he felt it wouldn't be bad to have an attitude that could avoid some of the trouble.....

.....In the end, he still hadn't understood. When he was little, he had always used his fist to solve his problems. And he now responded instinctively.

Till now, he had never thought anything of his attitude. He didn't know what other people thought of him, and the people at the orphanage were happy he was becoming strong.

That was enough for him.

But because of that.....

"Speaking of which," Mifi said, interrupting Layfon's train of thought. "What did we come here for today? Although I had always wanted to come here one day..... "

Naruki had suggested coming here today. This restaurant was quite popular among girls.....Of course, Naruki had told Mifi and Layfon that when she'd said she wanted to come here.

Layfon also felt strange about Naruki's request to come here, since Mifi was usually the one jumping to this kind of thing.

"Uh, well....." Naruki patted her hair. "I have a favor to ask of Layton."

"Here?"

Naruki stuttered. "Uh, we didn't have.....to come here. If Layton's ok with it, I can just say this....."

".....Is it tiring?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes it's relaxing. Sometimes it's hard work or not hard work at all. But it'll surely take away some of your time."

"That's like a riddle!"

"Yeah, this isn't like me," she sighed.

".....Is this, to work for Nakki?" Meishen said.

A sour smile on Naruki's face. "Yes."

To work for Naruki meant to work with the City Police.

"Me?" Layfon said.

"I'm not trying to scout you from the platoon. I don't have the authority anyway, but the Military Arts course has recommended people to the City Police. I only knew of this after joining the police force. And there's one empty slot in that temporary list."

"And you want me to join?"

"Ah.....My superior knows that I know you. He wants me to ask you. A first-year entering a platoon really stands out."

"But I have to clean the Central Mechanism....."

"I know, so I'm not forcing you. Since you're a temp, that means you won't know when you'll be called, and the pay also isn't that good. I understand it's not reasonable to ask this of you when your job and school work have such irregular hours, but....."

Looking at her troubled expression, Layfon felt there must be something else she was hiding. If he didn't agree to her request, he might never find out about it.

"I get it. Sure."

Naruki was surprised. ".....Really?"

"Yeah, Naruki.....You, and you two are so good to me. If it's something I can do, I'll do it."

"No.....It might be strange for me to say this now, but you can think about it for a few days more and then give me your answer."

"That's all right. Whether it is the cleaning job or team training, I don't think they'd mind if I let them know what I'm doing."

"I'll tell them. After all, I asked for your help."

"OK, then shall we end the conversation here?" He clapped his hands.



He never thought he'd be asked to work the same day.

"Sorry!"

"That's ok." Layfon said to Naruki.

They stood in a building at the outskirts of the residential district, looking at the ground below.

Naruki's superior in the City Police was Formed Garen, a fifth-year student in Cultivation course. Short, but with a sturdy build, Garen was nervously checking water in the lab.

"Ah, it's you.....I'm sorry for troubling you."

It felt hard to approach Garen, but the man wasn't that difficult to get along with, really. His big and rough hand, like a blacksmith's, placed a beaker on the desk with caution, perhaps even fondness.

"It's a bit too quick, but I want you to lend us your strength."

"Sure."

Garen didn't look concerned at asking for Layfon to work right now. That must be the difficulty that Naruki was trying to hide.

"I want to explain the details to you. Have you got time today?"

"I have work in the Mechanism today. If you can do something about that, I don't mind."

"Good, then I'll talk with them. The reward isn't as good, but I'll pay for it. And you'll also get paid by the City Police."

"No.....You don't have to....."

"Either way, we're students. An equal price must be paid for the difficult living circumstances affected by this."

Layfon's reservations were quickly brushed aside.

"Besides, those guys who snatch away the achievement of students' hard work must be punished!" Garen said, unable to hide his fury.

And so Layfon stayed to watch the dormitories near the building he was in.

"I can make money doing this too," Layfon murmured to himself, who hadn't expected to get extra pay, and looked away from the dormitory to what was near it – the roaming bus station.

Most people who needed to use the buses were those getting out of the city, and most of them were business travelers, moving between cities to sell products. Sometimes true travelers without homes would appear, but that was rare. The freedom of travelers in Zuellni was restricted as all the districts were populated by students. The dormitory here was made for that purpose.

"Hasn't anyone taught you that intelligence is the most important thing?" Naruki said, playing with the rope she was carrying.

"Yeah, back in Grendan, I was always checking for sales."

"I think we're talking about different things....."

"That was important. If I wasn't paying attention, many kids wouldn't have seen the new year."

"....."

Feeling the speechless atmosphere around them, Layfon recalled what Garen had told him earlier. They were watching a dormitory that a group of business travelers had been living in for two weeks.

The travelers identified themselves as businessmen from the city of Rulgraig. They worked for a logistics division under the international company Vinesleif.

In the business district of Zuellni, Vinesleif sold news, novels and comic books from other cities, and also current information on fashion and entertainment. On the other hand, Zuellni also sold news and entertainment information made in Zuellni, as well as any (already unveiled) seeds of new species developed in the agriculture course.

This group of business travelers had been staying for two weeks.

"This isn't strange because the next roaming bus hasn't arrived yet, but....."

Roaming buses didn't follow a schedule. Every bus traveled freely between cities. It wasn't possible to make a timetable for them. Sometimes, one had to wait a month to get on a bus that would take them to their destination.

"But their purpose isn't to buy and sell ordinary information."

The agricultural major's research lab had a break-in one week ago. An information archive had been illegally taken.

"The missing information is the genetics pairing list of yet-to-be-unveiled new products. This goes against the treaties of the Alliance. To think they actually took the information before it was published....."

"But where's the evidence against them.....?"

A data chip was tiny. The tiniest was just the size of a fingernail. As such, a chip could be hidden anywhere, and besides, many of the products brought in by the business travelers were also data chips. The best way to hide a tree was to put it in a forest – even if they had the data chip from the lab, it would still be hard for the City Police to find it.

"We have proof. Although they disabled the security cameras, they can't deceive our eyes."

Yes, the City Police had an eyewitness.

"To take back the chip and prevent them from making a copy of it, tonight, someone from our side will confiscate all things related to the information system."

Every city had its own laws. There were laws set down by the Academy City Alliance that applied to general areas, but in reality, only the police force in the city itself could enforce the laws.

Inside Zuellni, there were no jails to keep people in for a long period. Students who committed a crime were either suspended or forced to withdraw from a course. As for people outside Zuellni, they were forced to leave the city. When the crime involved a company and some organization, all Zuellni could do was report it to that organization and the government of the city that the organization was based in. Zuellni had no way of interfering with whether the criminals would receive punishment back in their home city or not.

But without the roaming buses, cities would become isolated. Besides, if the criminals were outsiders, they had nowhere to hide in the city. Usually, they wouldn't resist meaninglessly and would follow the City Police's instructions. If they resisted, they'd either die or be forced to leave.....Which was much better than being marooned on the barren earth. As long as they didn't come close to the city anymore, their crimes would also disappear.

But.....



Garen's expression twisted. "We could've done this smoothly, but the roaming bus is here."

"And the departure time is?"

"Supplying takes three days. The workers are delaying the paperwork to give us time, but the bus will depart tomorrow morning."

If they knew there was a way out, the criminals might escape on their own.

They'd probably do that.

"Tonight's the key."

"Ah.....We'd have had more time if we had found the eyewitness earlier. Anyway, it's no use regretting it. The problem is we don't know how powerful 'they' are. We don't know how many Military Artists they have with them, but there can't be none. We don't have many people in the City Police and Military Arts course who have had real fighting experience. Like before, we've accumulated some real experience fighting monsters.....But, it really is better to have a platoon member when it comes to fighting people."

"But in that case, you could've picked someone else....."

"No. It has to be you!" Garen smiled. A cunning smile. He patted Layfon's shoulder.

"I have high expectations for you, newcomer!"

Layfon touched his shoulder. In it wasn't pain, but Garen's expectation – which wasn't a bad feeling at all, but the 'him' hiding somewhere inside himself wasn't sure whether that expectation was a comfortable feeling.

(Will I feel troubled by someone else's expectation of me?)

No answer surfaced.

"I'm sorry!" Naruki said suddenly.

City policemen had been deployed around the dormitory. Two officers were heading for the dormitory, about to confiscate the data chips.

"What?"

"Sorry for asking you to do this."

"It's nothing."

"No, because.....This is too despicable. He used our connection to....."

"What does it matter? I don't mind so long as it's something I'm capable of doing. Meishen's bento was delicious. I feel bad for always accepting her goodwill, so I'm glad I have a chance to return the favor."

"No, you don't get it, Layton. Platoon members don't have to work for the City Police. This isn't your job."

Now he understood why Garen said "It has to be you". So that was why. Did Garen think that it was easier to call on Layfon because of his ignorance?

The feeling of Garen's hand on his shoulder disappeared.

Even so, no resentment arose in him.

"That really is strange. Power should be used where it's needed. So if there's a need here for a platoon member, then a platoon member should help out."

In truth, a Heaven's Blade Receiver's main duty was to fight filth monsters, but sometimes they also worked with the police to maintain security. A few Heaven's Blade receivers were so strong that they could only fight filth monsters, but the rest of the Receivers helped out the police as best as they could.

Layfon felt uneasy that, being a platoon member, he had the privilege of using his strength for good and ill.

"Layton....."

"And they said they're paying me for this, so you don't have to mind me."

"Really? I suppose. Well....."

A devious light shone in her eyes as her face relaxed.

"Do this like you're returning a favor to Mei. You can take her out on weekends and listen to her talk. She seems rather troubled lately."

"Oh....."

"You don't want to?"

"That's fine, but where should I take her?"

"There are many restaurants she hasn't tried. I'll ask Mifi to pick a bright restaurant with a good atmosphere. You take care of the rest."

"Isn't that the hardest part?"

Anyway, his experience in dating a girl was limited to Leerin. Besides, at that age, he never quite thought of Leerin as a girl. They hadn't reached the age of romance yet.

He hadn't seriously thought of what places a girl would be happy to visit.

"Good luck!" Naruki smiled at the sighing Layfon.

Thunderous noise shot out from the dormitory.

Naruki and Layfon turned their faces to that direction.

The door to the dormitory was busted open. The two officers rolled out from the room. Blood sprayed in the air.

Five men ran out, kicking aside the shattered door. The document said there were five people.....So all five were here. One of the men carried an old suitcase. The data chip must've been inside.

Layfon studied the culprits.

"All five of them."

"All?"

"Yes, and they're all skilled."

Layfon saw the light of Kei flowing in them. Wild Internal-type Kei roared in their bodies.

Naruki also narrowed her eyes, but couldn't see anything.

She didn't doubt Layfon's words. "This is bad."

"We also have five Military Artists in the surrounding forces, but....."

"It's best if we move over to the scene," Layfon said.

As they were analyzing the situation, policemen had surrounded the five culprits, raising their batons.

"Don't resist!" a student who seemed to be the captain shouted.

The business travelers took that in a relaxed manner.

Layfon saw they had Dites in their hands.

"I'm going."

"Counting on ya," Naruki said.

The five business travelers made their move as Layfon leaped out the window.

They restored their Dites – sword, gun, scimitar. All were close-quarters weapons.

The normal students in the troop called out.

The five moved.

Their movements weren't particularly fast to a Military Artist, but their weapons were hard enough to cut through flesh and bone. Compared to them, the policemen only held batons. A baton was the same as a Dite and could be quite powerful if used in different ways.....

Unfortunately, all of the Dites in Zuellni had safety locks on. A pointy blade would have its point removed. In Zuellni, they fought fights that would never see anyone die.

And that point was now decisive in this fight.

The movements of students who lacked experience in fighting with dangerous weapons and the movements of mercenary Military Artists who had earned their fair share in life and death battles were really different.

"Waaaa!" The thought of not letting the enemy's blade come close made their movements stiff.

The baton pulled close to defend, but the opponent's blade pierced through an opening. Blood spurted from the student's shoulder.

"Ahhhh!"

He wasn't the only student calling in pain and falling onto the ground.

The other four students had different wounds on different parts of their bodies.

And then, Layfon landed.

The five culprits were about to rush into the roaming bus. Noticing Layfon, they all stared at him in surprise, alarmed, but they didn't stop running.

Layfon restored his Dite. Kei flowed into the blade, and a blue light traced the night sky. He swung. His Kei shot out of the sword towards the five people.

The nearest two culprits jumped up and evaded the attack, but Layfon wasn't targeting them.

A light noise came from beside his feet.

The suitcase had rolled to him.

"Ah.....!" The man who had been holding the suitcase yelled in pain.

Layfon kicked back the suitcase. It slid to one of the members of the troop.

"You!"

The five stopped running. Layfon raised his sword, as if to prevent them from going past him.

It seemed the police were right. The data chip must be in the suitcase.

"It's not good to steal," he said.

The five rushed towards Layfon.

Layfon slowly moved the blade before him.

The five closed in on Layfon at high speed, using Internal-type Kei.

Layfon shot out – External Burst-type Kei. The three people in front of him jumped aside to avoid the Kei.

But where were the other two?

Without giving him time to think, the man leading the five landed and slashed upwards. Layfon jumped back, and at the same time, two people appeared from behind the man, as if his back had just split in two. They attacked Layfon's sides.

Layfon crouched, evading a huge knife and used his sword to block the stabbing motion of a spear.

The three encircled Layfon.

The other two people.....

"Hey! What happened!?" the man who previously carried the suitcase shouted.

He looked back and saw his two comrades lying on the ground. "How did this....."

"I knew it wasn't possible for five of you to reach me," Layfon said.

"It was you....."

"I saw through your moves. Your tricks were useless."

He deliberately let the two evade his Kei the first time he shot it out, but he hid a second wave of Kei within it, one that dispersed into the evading paths.

Needle Kei.

The condensed form of Kei hit the two in their chests, and they fainted.

"And....."

Layfon looked behind him.

"!"

The three remaining culprits also followed his gaze. They widened their eyes in surprise.

The suitcase was gone.

Had the police taken it?.....No.

Layfon's gaze flicked to the upper left – the rooftop of the dormitory, and saw Naruki.

In her right hand was the end of a rope, and the left was a suitcase, wrapped tightly in the rope.

Naruki's lassoing skill.

"I'm not returning this to you!" she shouted.

"Damn you!!"

The three rushed towards Layfon, who was pouring Kei into his sword, not at all impatient.

His Kei had turned the sword into a part of his body, and through it, he felt the murderous intent of the three in the disturbance of the air. The point of the sword caressed the air as if to quiet it – then Layfon slashed the air apart.

External Burst-type Kei – Whirl Kei.

The wind before Layfon ceased its movement for a split second, and it started to spin at an increasing velocity.

It pulled the three culprits in, floating and tossing their bodies in midair. Numerous small explosions battered them, the air spinning madly, the Kei smashing them without a moment of rest.

As everyone gazed at this scene, breathless, Layfon raised his sword and swung down.

The air stopped spinning.

All noise ceased, leaving behind the silence of the three unconscious criminals.

"Brilliantly done!" Garen praised. He had already checked the contents of the suitcase.

The police collected themselves and went to deal with the five men.

"Confiscate everything, the clothes too. Forget the food and water though. Don't miss anything. Change them into prison clothes with the crime seal and put them on the roaming bus," Garen instructed.

Members of the troop went to cut through the culprits' clothes. They were being careful, considering how the data chip could be hidden inside a seam.

Layfon watched the men work as he checked the contents of the suitcase.

"Is it in here?"

The inside of the suitcase was crammed full of data chips.

"Not sure, but we can't tell till we've looked through every single chip. Um, it's probably in there."

Garen's smile turned devious. "I wonder how much we can get for this many chips?"

Layfon widened his eyes.

"What's with the look? We don't know whether they got these chips through legal or illegal means, but anyway, we have no way of returning the chips to their rightful owners. In that case, isn't it right to sell them so Zuellni can profit?"

That was true, but the way that Garen told him this so honestly and matter-of-factly was a bit surprising.

"There's never too much money to feed all the students in Zuellni."

"Yeah....."

"Ah, Alseif-kun's done great today. I'll increase your pay for tonight," Garen said and left to join the men looking through the clothes of the culprits.

"I'm sorry. He's that type of a person," Naruki said and patted Layfon's shoulder.

"No.....I don't find him a bad person."

Naruki frowned at Garen. "Perhaps.....I can't really tell whether his attitude on money is good or bad."

"I'm not sure either," Layfon smiled bitterly.

This must be nonchalance. People might think Garen was thick-skinned, but Garen himself didn't find his action despicable.....No, he wouldn't have cared even if people thought him base.

That was the truth.

Garen was similar to the old Layfon back in Grendan, doing all he could to earn money for the orphanage. Only that Layfon had hidden his attitude till the last moment, and he hid it because he felt guilty about it.

(Would I have turned out differently if I was honest like him?)

He couldn't help but think of this possibility, huh, but that was pointless. It was useless to think up hypotheses. The present him existed because he was unable to become like Garen.

(Besides, I don't hate the me I am now.)

The me.....His circumstances.

He had friends to talk to. He wasn't as tense and anxious as before.

He had hoped for such a good environment.

(No.....There's still pressure here.)

Still a tiny bit of trouble.

(Hmm.....)

How did Senpai spend her night?

What was she worrying about?

No answers came from the night sky he was gazing at. Above him was only the darkness, scattered with the light of countless stars.

Chapter 3: Cry for what?

That night, she was cleaning the floor by herself with a cloth.

All kinds of noises, signifying the gears were at work, filled the Engine Room. When she first started school, she had trouble focusing, as the noises she heard the previous night while cleaning kept distracting her. Now? It didn't bother her anymore.

She looked at the oil-stained gloves, the cloth, the blackened foam of the soap, and the dirty floor that stayed dirty no matter how hard she worked at it.

In truth, Nina wasn't looking at anything.

According to the student in charge of the Engine Room, Layfon was helping the City Police today.

'Helping the City Police' meant he was working as a temp? Why did he take on that irregular job when he already had to clean the Engine Room? Would his body be alright?

(If he gets sick.....)

What would happen to the 17th platoon?

The team might be disbanded arbitrarily. If their ace got sick.....

(No.....This is too strange.)

She had expectations for Layfon when he first joined the platoon, but they were lower then. She had only seen him as a particularly brilliant Kouhai in the Military Arts, but what she now anticipated was the level of his fighting skill.

She didn't think it was wrong for her to expect him to fight well.

Layfon was stronger than she first thought he was. This was the truth, and it wouldn't be right to ignore that reality. She would use what could be used. There was nothing wrong with that way of thinking.

(I've always wanted to find a solution.)

Sharnid and Felli were the same. They had the strength but not the drive. Nina wondered whether her expectations of them were wasted.

The team she had formed was not the team she had in mind.

But she didn't wish for a perfect team at that time. It was just that her way of thinking had changed since then.

Nobody was better as a sniper than Sharnid. She hadn't seen the true worth of Felli's psychokinesis, but the girl's ability must be extremely high for the Student President to recommend her. Harley's knowledge and skill in Dites hadn't failed her.

Nina thought all she needed was for herself to become stronger.

But.....

Layfon appeared.

(That power.....)

In Grendan, a place with more experience fighting in Military Arts matches and against filth monsters than any other city, Layfon had become one of the Twelve Heaven's Blade Receivers.

(Is scary.....)

That day when the filth monsters attacked Zuellni, Nina thought she'd die as food for the larvae. She thought she had no way of resisting the principle of natural selection that ruled the world.

Nina came to Zuellni to see the outside world. As someone living in a city facing the end of its journey, Nina had formed a platoon to do something about that. This feeling she held was frail in the face of the gigantic wave of filth monsters.

Layfon had pushed back that wave. He wiped out all the larvae and killed the mother all by himself.

She was truly scared when she saw him appearing on the other side of the air shield – in a place where the air was polluted, filled with harmful substances.

Was he human?

And she was relieved when he collapsed.

Yes, he really was human.

The time required to fix the damaged city and for Layfon to recuperate in the hospital had wiped away her feelings of that time.

Leaving the fact that Layfon was very strong.

The 17th platoon could operate as the ideal team she had always wanted as long as they had Layfon's power.

(But.....We still lost the match.)

They lost to the 14th platoon in the platoon match.

The captain of the 14th platoon said it wouldn't work if only Layfon was strong.

(Then.....Just what should we do?)

Nina was confused. The 14th platoon had used teamwork to win. Was that what the 17th platoon needed? But she held no expectations for that to appear any time soon. Her experience with the team, from the moment when it was first formed till now, told her it was not possible.

(What should I do.....)

Despair must have come to her then.....Nina must have realized what the team needed when the filth monsters attacked Zuellni.

That feeling came to her when she was helpless.

There could be no teamwork if they relied entirely on one person's strength.

A tug.....

"Um.....?" At the tug of her hair, she brought her attention back to the present. At some point in time, her hand had stopped its motion. A light weight had settled on her shoulders and the back of her neck. She reached back and felt something soft.



"Oh, it's you....."

"~~~♪"

She took hold of the thing and pulled around to where she could see it.

"Geez.....Did you run away again?" She smiled.

Zuellni returned an innocent smile.

The city's consciousness, a consolidated form of electric particles, protected the people from filth monsters. Zuellni's hand touched Nina's face, patting it gently. Nina relaxed at that guileless face.

"You.....Why do you like me so much?" Nina said, even knowing she wouldn't get a reply.

And as Nina had known, Zuellni only smiled, showing no signs of whether she had understood Nina's words.

"Yeah, I shouldn't need to think about that."

This kid really loved the people living in this city. Nina wasn't anyone special. She had only accepted Zuellni under a chance circumstance, so the Electronic Fairy often came to find her.

Just like how Zuellni was touching Nina's face.

Zuellni wanted to be touched in turn.

The consciousness itself, rather than its physical manifestation in the form of the city, wanted to be caressed.

"Meeting you was the best thing in my life."

And.....

"Because I met you, I want to protect you."

Nina met Zuellni when she first started cleaning the Engine Room. Just like Layfon, she was shocked at the encounter. She knew the city had a consciousness, but she had never guessed it took the form of a little girl.

"I can love this city because you're in this form. Don't laugh at me for being cold-blooded. Just view me as narrow-minded.....It's a refreshing and surprising experience to touch, to understand another and laugh together. I'm very happy."

That was why she wanted to protect Zuellni through her own hands.

"Yes.....that's right."

She held Zuellni close to her face. The Electronic Fairy struggled as if she was itchy, then she pressed her nose on Nina's hair. Her small nose touched Nina's ear lobe. The absence of breath was the difference between human and Electronic Fairy.

"I'll protect you with my own hands."

So she had to become stronger.

How strong could humans become? Nina knew someone was far ahead of her.

That, at least, was a level humans could reach.

"I will become strong, Zuellni!" she murmured in Zuellni's ear.

Zuellni shook Nina's hair, pouting in incomprehension.



".....Ah!"

The sound stopped Felli's steps.

This was the entrance to the Military Arts training complex.

The girl that Felli saw stood up from the steps. She was Layfon's classmate – Meishen Trinden.

"Ex-excuse.....me."

Looking at the teary-eyed Meishen, Felli wanted to ask whether her face was that scary, but on second thought she decided against it.

(She ran away the last time too.)

The last time Meishen seemed to need Layfon for something, so Felli asked her to come in with her. However, Meishen had refused after saying something incomprehensible, and had run away.

(I know I'm a bit cold.....)

But that was still a great shock to Felli.

".....Um.....Uh, well....."

"What is it?"

Felli still replied in a deliberately cold manner to the stuttering Meishen.

".....Ah," Meishen lowered her head.

Felli knew what Meishen wanted to talk about.

The letter.

Besides the letter that Meishen had dropped when she fled, she – It wasn't possible for her to come and find Felli, especially all by herself.

The letter was for Layfon.

Felli had thought, for a moment, that it was a love letter. The letter bearing stamps from various cities and its worn out appearance, proof of its long journey, convinced Felli it wasn't a love letter.

What she wanted to know was why Meishen had a letter for Layfon? And who mailed this letter to here?

Leerin Marfes.

A girl's name.

Felli couldn't hand the letter over like this. She'd feel guilty for giving it back with signs the letter had been opened.

(As if I had peeked at the letter.)

Felli thought so, leaving aside the fact that she did open the envelope and read the letter. She still had it with her. It'd be bad if her shifty brother found the letter in her room, so she had put it inside her schoolbag.

"Ah, excuse me.....Excuse me....."

".....If it's about the letter, I've already given it to him."

Just what was she saying.....Felli wondered. She was tired of Meishen's stuttering and planned to say something annoying, but what burst out of her mouth was a lie.....

(If I had said straightaway that it was a lie.....)

Then Meishen could have interpreted it as a mean joke.

.....But when Felli had thought of what to say, it was already too late.

Meishen lifted her face, her disposition now bright and lively.

".....Thank you very much!"

.....Not a lie anymore. Now she had to do it.

".....That's all right. I'm going now."

Felli fled through the entrance to the complex without looking back. In that case, she must give Layfon the letter before Meishen mentioned it to him.

(How do I give it to him?)

That was the problem. The letter's been opened. If she gave it to him, he'd know she had read it.

(Really.....Why?)

If it was anyone else's letter, she would have returned it with no interest at all.

(Why did this letter come to my hand?)

She resented this unfair coincidence, but not the cause of it – Meishen. The girl must have received the letter under some circumstance.....Like a letter being delivered to the wrong place.

(Damn.....)

"Felli."

Someone called her name as she cursed the postman who made the flawed delivery.

It was Nina.

"Lucky I ran into you. I booked the battle arena. We'll train over there today."

"All right."

"Please tell the others that I'll take care of the paperwork for borrowing the training drones."

"Ok."

Having greeted Felli quickly, Nina headed outside the training complex.

(Battle arena.....?)

Just when annoyance at the conversation came through.....

(The Locker Room.....That's a good place.)

Nobody would find out if she placed the letter in the Locker Room. In other words, it was enough that nobody knew Felli was the one who put the letter there.

(Yes.)

Felli hurried to the training facility. She had decided on the method, but she didn't relax.

(How annoying.)

She found herself getting irritated for having to lie and take up this troublesome burden. But it wasn't just that, she also wanted to get rid of the letter from her schoolbag.

(Why did this thing come to me?)

She was annoyed because she thought too much of it, too much of the person who sent this letter, of what Meishen was thinking when she picked it up, of whether Meishen had looked at the letter, of the expression Layfon would have when he received the letter.....

And the expression she herself showed after reading the letter.....

(I'll put this letter back quickly!)

She wanted this impatience gone.

Felli's hand pushed open the door to the training arena.



This thing was huge. Too huge.

"So what is it?" Sharnid asked.

In the room were Layfon, Harley and Sharnid. It wasn't that Sharnid came on time to train, which was rare for him, but that Nina was late again.

Felli's lateness was usual though.

"Well, this is for my research."

What came with Harley's trolley was a sword.

A huge sword.

The sword was removed from a niche on the trolley, and the sword's handle now rested near Layfon's chest. It was as long as Layfon was tall. It was a sword, but just a wooden sword. A few wires were twisted around the blade.

"Layfon, can you try wielding it?"

"Oh....."

Flabbergasted at the huge blade, Layfon took up the handle and lifted the sword with one hand.

The heavy weight pressed down on his wrist.

"How does it feel?"

"A bit heavy, but I can use this....."

He waited for the two others to retreat to the wall and then swung down the blade.

The weight of the sword and the centrifugal force of the swing caused him to lose his balance.

"Um....."

He took a deep breath again and let internal Kei run through his body.

This strengthened his flesh, increased the density of his muscles and lightened his body in a way different from the lightness of the air. He swung again.

A low howl rumbled through the air. Not the same as the usual tearing.

"Woah!" Harley called as the gale swept past his position.

Layfon's consciousness had already drifted away from the outside world after Harley's outburst. He tried different moves. An upward strike. Left to right. Sudden stab. The howling of the raging wind dominated his eardrums. A feeling of himself separating from the sword rose in him. He felt his body swaying thanks to the centrifugal force. He immediately knew he had to handle this weapon differently, but it wasn't possible to use that move in this narrow space.

"Hu....."

Layfon stopped moving and breathed out the remaining Kei and heat inside him.

".....Are you satisfied?"

Layfon almost swallowed back his breath at that icy voice.

Felli stood at the door. Her elegant brow furrowed. Her cold gaze pierced him.

".....Thank you for all your hard work."

"Yeah! It was hard!"

The silver hair that seemed to melt at a touch was tangled up like a typhoon.

"This long hair....."

"Ah, yes?"

At the edge of his vision, Layfon saw Sharnid and Harley running as far away as they could from the door, as if this had nothing to do with them.

Sharnid was bold enough to whistle deliberately.

No, forget Sharnid, even Harley ran away. Just what was going on.....

".....Were you listening?"

"Sure."

"Really? This hair.....It's hard work to comb it everyday. Yes, very, very hard....."

"Uh.....Is that so.....That must be tiring."

"Yes, very tiring."

"Ha! Hahaha....." All he could do was laugh dryly. What else should he say? Nothing.

No, there was something.

".....I'm sorry."

"I don't accept your apology."

No hesitation at all.

"Aaaah, isn't this fine? Look, Layfon regrets what he did."

".....No matter how I look at it, you were the one who brought this thing in, weren't you?"

".....Sorry," Harley lowered his head, shot down in an instant.

Felli sighed. "Never mind, there's something more important. I met the captain on the way here. She said she got permission to use the battle arena, so we'll be training over there today."

"Wow, that's sudden."

"I don't get it either."

Without changing her foul mood, she disappeared to the other side of the door.

Released from the tense atmosphere, Layfon and Harley sighed at the same time.

(Oh...the battle arena.)

"Senpai....."

"Yes."

Layfon spoke softly to him.

"Oh, so you do have to do that? Right, I'll ask."

"Thanks."

"What're you two talking about?"

"Just talking about the sword."

"Oh....."

Sharnid looked at the huge sword without much of an interest as it was placed back on the trolley.

"But.....Why did you have to make this sword so ridiculously big?"

"Ah.....It's the issue with the density of the foundation. No matter how it's calculated, the size comes out the same. Once this is completed, it should be lighter."

"Oh, so you're making a new type of Dite? If I remember correctly, inventing isn't your specialty, is it Harley?"

"Yeah, my roommate came up with this idea. Well, I'm better at organizing information and adjusting settings, but my roommate isn't the only one inventing. Our budget was only approved on the condition that we work on this project with three people."

"Right.....Sounds annoying."

"That's mean."

"I'm not saying you're stupid. I just don't know much about this kind of thing," Sharnid waved and left the room. Layfon and Harley caught up with him and together, they headed for the battle arena.

Training ended without incident. Layfon thought the cooperation of the team as a whole was better than when he first joined. He could feel Sharnid's eyes when he was providing support from the rear, and Felli's speed at conveying intelligence, though not as fast as the time when the filth monsters attacked Zuellni, it wasn't as slow as before either.

They had three rounds of mock training against the drones. They won all three matches, and there was nothing they could comment on about their timing. Even so, Nina's distant expression remained.

"Well, we'll stop here for today."

"Uh, thanks for the hard work, everyone."

"Thanks for the hard work."

The review session in the Locker Room ended sloppily under Nina's announcement. As usual, Sharnid headed instantly for the bathroom, and Felli, who hadn't even sweat a single drop, took up her bag and left the room.

As usual, Layfon prepared to return to the training complex to train with Nina.

This was because the team needed its two primary attackers to work closely. If they couldn't develop a chemistry between them and coordinate intuitively, then everything was just talk.....

"Layfon."

"Yes?"

"You can go back today."

"Huh?"

"We'll stop training together for a while."

"Why?"

"Because there's no need to."

He was dumbstruck at how easy she gave voice to that thought.

It was easy for him to say "Definitely not." In truth, they did coordinate in the mock training just then, but that was because their movements matched. He wouldn't call that the perfect intuitive coordination.

He thought Nina wanted him to coordinate well with her, so their current situation wasn't too good.

But she said "There's no need to."

What was going on?

"Anyway, we'll stop training. You can go back," she said and turned from him.

He felt like he was just rejected.

"Nina....." Harley said.

Harley had easily entered the area of rejection that Layfon, wondering whether he should step in, failed to enter. This was the free relationship of childhood friends, a relationship not bound by anything.

This feeling was different from the distant feeling he had, of standing on the other side of the glass. He was dumbfounded at her refusal to train with him.

"I'm going then," Layfon said. Aghast at himself for saying this without resistance, he left the Locker Room.



The closing of the door seemed to seal off their relationship. The simple tone of the voice cut through her chest.

Nina shook her head to disperse that pain.

"What am I doing?"

She knew.

She knew, but what was she doing? Asking herself this question?

"Don't be confused."

As always, when she failed to find the exit to the maze of her thoughts, she stopped thinking.

Even if one could speculate about the future, predicting it wasn't possible. The only predictable thing was death, but no one knew when they'd die.

(My future's at a state where even speculating over it makes it sound strange.)

So she could only do what she thought was right.

"Should I return to the training complex?"

She had been clear in her refusal to train. Layfon probably wasn't in the training complex now.

.....If he was there, she had to move somewhere else.

".....Hm?"

Something had fallen beside the chair.

(Success.)

Felli had placed the letter beneath Layfon's bag. This way, Layfon might think he had misplaced it in his bag and hadn't realized it.

She had resealed the letter, albeit a bit clumsily. Layfon might not discover the letter had been opened though, since he really was slow. Her heart snickered, but her expression remained cold as usual. She raised her fist a bit to compliment herself, then left the battle arena with sprightly steps.



Night came. The sky turned dark.

Layfon stepped into the battle arena again.

In the darkness of the night, the bugs sheltered in the bushes called, their sound sending ripples through the air.

In Layfon's hand was the sword Harley had brought over. Holding the wooden handle of the clumsy and huge sword that had iron wires wrapped around it, Layfon waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

"Fu!" He let out a breath, waited for Internal Kei to flow through his body, then began his movements.

First he repeated the basic moves he had used in the training complex. Strong wind blasted the war field, the sword's weight unbalancing Layfon's center of gravity. He adjusted his center of gravity as he swung the sword.

Instead of using force to control the swaying of his body caused by the sword, he adjusted his movements to follow the direction of the sword's weight.

And used that power.

After some time, Layfon was no longer staying at one place. He was moving constantly in the confines of the arena, following the direction that the weight led him.

And not long after, he was controlling that direction.

Moving without a pattern, he propelled himself forward in the arena. His movements were different from before. Very different from the basic moves of handling a sword.

He leaped from the ground as he swung. Spinning in the air, he used the weight of the sword to shoot out his Kei. The force generated by the attack that pulled him forward was then turned into the force of his next attack.

He repeated this process numerous times, his feet not even touching the ground.

"....."

The sword penetrated the ground, and Layfon stopped moving. As numerous soil particles rained down on him, Internal Kei gathered in his feet.

Internal-type Kei – Whirl Kei.



And he leaped upward, pulling the sword out from the ground and swinging it.

Touching the ground, he leaped up again to swing the sword. It was much harder to control the weight of the sword in midair than on solid earth. Layfon continued to practice, trying to find a way to control the blade.

At last, he stopped his leaping movements and breathed out slowly to disperse his Kei.

Light flooded the arena.

"I no longer know.....how to describe it," Harley said in a low voice as he approached with Felli and Karian.

"How's it doing?"

Harley jotted down notes on a notepad as Layfon told him his thoughts.

"How're you doing with the invention?" Karian asked when Harley finished writing down everything.

The alchemy student replied, his face dimming. "No problem at all. The basic theory was completed at the time Layfon started here. The only issue left is whether the thing would work after it's manufactured. Yeah, just a few adjustments would do. There aren't many people who can use this, so I never thought I'd have a chance to make it."

The fact that filth monsters were near Zuellni was top secret, but it wouldn't make sense to hide that from the alchemists, so Karian had divulged it to Harley and his camp of inventors.

But not everyone in the 17th platoon knew – not Nina and Sharnid. Layfon had also asked Harley to keep it a secret from them.

"We can only give up if that's the fate of the city."

".....True, but I don't want that kind of fate," Harley sighed, clearing the cloudy look on his face.

"Is it really all right for the guy who came up with the basic theory to miss this?" Karian said.

"He's a weirdo. He's got incredible skill and wrists as a sword maker, but he himself is pretty annoying."

"That's the sign of an artist."

"Really? I think weirdo is enough to describe him."

"Hahaha."

"You'll feel the same if you meet him."

Karian left them to lock up the battle arena. At the exit, Harley also left for the alchemy lab, saying the weirdo might still be there.

Layfon and Felli stayed to wait for Karian.

The streetlights dimly chased away the darkness of the empty road leading to the war field.

"You're accommodating," Felli said.

"I can't let others do this, right?" Layfon smiled bitterly.

Felli lifted her face. "Perhaps.....I can't help but feel that you've given up."

"Given up?"

"Your purpose for coming here."

"....."

"Don't you want to live a normal life?"

"I'm not giving it up."

"Then why did you agree to this?"

Layfon moved his gaze away.

"Well.....I can't do anything about it. A man's instinct is strong."

"Yes, but the problem won't end just by getting rid of filth monsters."

".....I suppose."

Unable to argue against Felli, his smile turned weak.

A huge number of filth monsters were outside the city.

"Won't it be too late if something happens to humanity because of your foolish act?"

"I don't know about something that big. But if that's what I can do, then I can only do that. Isn't that right?"

".....Has it got to be you?"

"Huh?"

"We can win if we aren't afraid of sacrifice. You said that before, 'We can still win if we are willing to sacrifice.'"

"Yes, but I don't think it's good to not do what I'm capable of doing."

"....."

".....I'm sorry."

"That's fine, I know I'm the type who can but won't do things."

Layfon watched Felli.

"I don't find that despicable. That is my determination. It's a path I chose for myself. No matter what others think, I won't regret it when I die."

Layfon admired her determination. She tried hard to confront her fate, and she kept trying even though it wasn't successful. Her way wasn't bad either.

"But I hate myself for doing nothing and causing people to die, especially if it happens to senpai and everyone I know."

"Hm?"

"Even in Grendan, I tried to solve everything alone. I didn't care that others found my way base and despicable. On the contrary, I really don't understand why they had to say those things."

Had the people at the orphanage wanted him to do that? He didn't know. He had never thought to ask. He knew the answer even if he didn't ask. On the other hand, perhaps that wasn't the truth. Layfon had left Grendan to come to Zuellni.

He didn't hate them.

But even if he didn't earn money that way, he would have found similar means as he didn't want the orphanage Head and Leerin to worry about poverty.

He attempted to solve everything through his own strength.

"I'm really naive."

"You are."

"That's mean!"

".....Anyway, I dislike the traditional title of 'senpai'. Call me something else."

"Huh?"

"Don't your classmates call you Layton?"

Her sudden change of topic was perplexing.

"Yes, but.....I don't think I'd be happy if that name got out, uh, how should I put it....."

"Then let me find something else to call you. Lay, Layton-kun, Layfon-kun, Lay-chin, Lay-san.....Which is better?"

"Uh? Can I only choose from that list?"

"Have you got any other suggestions?"

"Hmm, it's hard to come up with a nickname for myself."

"Then I'll call you Lay-chin."

".....Please let me think on it more."

"Why? Isn't Lay-chin cute?"

"No, if there's a cooler way....."

Being called 'Lay-chin♪' by an emotionless voice just sounded strange. Not that he wanted her to use it in a cute voice.

.....Just thinking of that sent a chill down his spine.

"How about 'Lay the Flash'? Everyday, when I see you, I'll say "Good morning 'Lay the Flash', 'Hello, Lay the Flash', 'Goodnight, Lay the Flash.' In any situation when I need to use your name, I'll call you 'Lay the Flash'."

"....."

"Are you embarrassed?"

"If you know, then don't call me that!! But why Flash?"

"Do you want a word other than Flash?"

"That's not the issue."

"You're selfish."

"Me?"

"Oh well, I'll just call you Fon Fon."

"Wa, that's totally different! It sounds like the name of some rare animal."

"What does that matter? Fon Fon, do you want snacks?" she politely took out a wrapped up chocolate from her pocket. That action of hers totally depleted Layfon's energy.

"Am I a pet?"

"It's enough that you act like a pet."

"Wu....."

"You only need to be a pet, so you don't have to force yourself."

"Hmm?"

".....My brother's back," Felli turned around quickly, giving him no time to seek clarification.

"Sorry for making you wait. Actually, I didn't expect you to wait for me."

"You didn't say not to wait for you. Besides, you're pretty frail. It's dangerous for you to head back alone."

"Hahaha, what an extreme way of putting it. Sorry for making you guys wait, but I've got something else I must do, so I'll be heading off to the Student Council room. You can go back first."

"You should have told us earlier."

"Uhhh, it was my mistake. Sorry. Right, you must be hungry after all that exercise, Layfon. Because of me the schedule was pushed back so late. Felli, take him to a good restaurant and have something to eat," Karian

said, took out some bills from his wallet and handed them to Felli. Before Layfon and Felli could say anything, the Student President had already left them.

"Got it," Felli murmured to the speechless Layfon.

"Well, since this is a rare occasion, let's go to a lively bar. We can enjoy the night while drinking delicious wine. Please get a key to a decent hotel room."

"No, please don't say that as if everything's been decided. Besides, we aren't old enough to drink alcohol."

Moreover, that kind of atmosphere wouldn't suit Layfon and Felli.

Layfon wasn't solemn enough to have to go to a bar, and Felli's crisp and beautiful face gave off a feeling different from an adult's.

But if it was a place for Felli.....

(A restaurant catering to families.....)

A family restaurant with kids.....Putting aside her beauty, Felli was like a child pretending to be mature.

Lips pouting, she was paying a lot of attention to the toys near the cashier.

(Ah, that would suit her too perfectly!)

Unfortunately, there weren't any family restaurants in Zuellni, but that didn't mean there weren't any toy shops.

".....You seem to be thinking of something weird," Felli said.

"Of course not!"

She held her suspicious gaze.

"Never mind, there's a restaurant close by that I often visit, and it's open till quite late. Is it okay for me to treat you?"

"You don't have to worry about that kind of thing. Let's go, Fon Fon."

".....Wait, have you settled on that name already?"

"I've decided. Fon Fon, I'll leave you here if you don't hurry up."

With no room to resist being given a new nickname, he chased after Fell, feeling more tired than when he was practicing in the arena.



After dinner with Fell, Layfon returned to the dormitory, had a shower and fell into the bed.

His body relaxed in complete exhaustion. As he slowly entered a state of false sleep, he thought back on what had happened to him so far.

He spent a lot of time focusing today. That image and those words distracted him while he was handling his sword.

"We'll stop training together for a while."

He didn't think Nina's words had that much of an impact on him, but he might be wrong.

"But it's probably different from a mental impact."

It felt more like.....A bad premonition. Irritation was more like it. At that time, he thought he had seen the clear face of the feeling that he got from Nina.....It looked similar to irritation, but he had yet to grasp hold of its true form.

"Yeah, it feels familiar."

In the wake of impatience and anxiety, his will to sleep had gone off somewhere.

In one swift moment, he thought he understood it, but then it slipped away. That was frustrating.

"Uuu.....Aaah!"

He moaned and tossed on the bed and accidentally fell off it. He was too relaxed, so he didn't have time to protect himself from the fall.

"Wu....." He climbed back up, pressing his nose with a hand, and he saw his wrist.

White dots scattered around his wrist, like injuries caused by scalding heat.

They were traces left from his contact with pollutant. When Layfon was being treated in the hospital, the doctor said the scars would fade given enough time. Yet even now, he could still find traces of their existence.

He thought his injuries were nothing, but he started doubting that when he saw the reaction of Nina and others.

It would be good if people looked at his scar and didn't think they were responsible.

But the scar Layfon was gazing at was another one. A black scar that stretched from his wrist to his elbow. It was a scar that would never fade, a scar left after the injury had healed. This was also one part of Layfon's past.

As long as one searched for it, one could find traces of injuries on his body. Injuries made in training, in matches, in fights against filth monsters. Not only that, but also the cuts he got on his knee and upper forehead when he was little, running around and crashing into walls. These two scars were lighter.

"This wound was really painful," he murmured, sitting on the bed and looking at the scar on his wrist.

He got this injury when practicing with the steel threads.

When he had become a Heaven's Blade Receiver, he learned ways to fight filth monsters from the other Heaven's Blade Receivers.

The Heaven's Blade Receiver who used steel threads was Lintence Savoleid Harden.

At first, Layfon trained with just one thread. At that time, he already knew how to extend his Kei into his weapon and feel the weapon as part of his nervous system.

But that wasn't enough to control the steel threads.

Lintence said not only the nervous system, but the weapon had to become his muscles too. Layfon thought that was Lintence's excuse, but after watching him groom the trees of the palace yard with his countless steel threads in one breath, Layfon had nothing to complain about.

While suffering for not being used to this way of fighting, he gradually learned how to control the steel threads as he pleased. One thread

became two, two became four, four became eight, eight between sixteen.....The number of steel threads increased.

Yet, it was only the number of threads that was increasing. He was still a great distance away from being able to control the threads as if his own arms had extended, as if they were really a part of his body.

.....With the Layfon now, he would have understood, but back then, he didn't get it.

He shouldn't have seen that technique.

Filth monsters at a more mature stage than the ones that attacked Zuellni not long ago assaulted Grendan at the time when Layfon managed to control more than 100 steel threads.

Lintence defeated them all.

Layfon couldn't help but imitate him, thinking he could also manage that technique. The Lintence watching him practice, as if putting him under surveillance, gradually faded from his vision.

He tried the technique when he was alone.....Cut by his own steel thread, he had fainted from intense pain and blood loss.

When he came to, he was lying on a hospital bed.

"Are you a moron?" was what he heard from Lintence when he opened his eyes.

"Would spiders get stuck on their webs? Then do those spiders that do have a right to live? A spider that's not a spider wants to become a spider. You need a thousand times, a million times, a billion times more practice than a true spider to become one. Moron! You're worse than a newly born tiny spider. It's too soon to want to weave a spider web when you don't even know how to emit silk. Go and start practicing from the very beginning!"

Layfon got quite an earful.

"His speech was over the top."

Rather than anger, a strange feeling rose in him as he thought about the past. Gazing at the scar, he laughed dryly.

Nothing had changed from then. The only condition to become a Heaven's Blade Receiver was to keep on becoming stronger, so he didn't have time to be scared of the weapon. He had then continued to practice with the steel threads alone. Lintence had also fallen silent, interrupting only when needed.

Every Heaven's Blade successor knew it was a lonely journey to reach the top by competing with each other. Young Layfon also had to satisfy that condition. He didn't have to be asked to satisfy it, because he was already fulfilling it.

But he had become more cautious.

He knew an uncontrollable power could harm its user, so before he managed to fully control that power, he decided to seal it inside himself.

Lintence hadn't taught Layfon anything beyond the basics of the steel threads. The duty of a Heaven's Blade Receiver was to become strong himself, not to help another become strong. Lintence had already broken that mutual rule by teaching Layfon the steel threads technique, so Layfon continued to practice without any complaints.

He hadn't sustained an injury as deep and severe as that one since then, but he still got many other injuries. Those injuries had all healed, disappeared, leaving many scars.

Every time a new scar appeared, he knew more of his weaknesses. He would correct that weakness before the wound healed. And by repeating that process, he finally managed to control the steel threads.

"Ah, perhaps....."

Why was he thinking of it? Why did he recall it? It was neither a painful nor a warm snatch of memory.

Without thinking, he was projecting his feelings over the feeling he got from Nina. He had experienced the uneasiness and incomprehension he felt from Nina.

Did Nina want to become strong alone?

Was she forcing herself to become strong through loneliness?

If that was the case, then.....At this thought, a dull pain flared in his chest.

Chapter 4: Run the entire lap

At the same time Layfon was whispering to himself.....

The heavy iron whips hung listlessly from her hands. Nina felt like she was suffocating, unable to stop her panting. She was sucking in air, yet her body wanted more. Despite the pain, she attempted to slow down her breathing.

She was so exhausted that her legs shook and pleaded with her to lie down, but she desperately kept standing, and slowly let her body cool off. Proper breathing technique was basic for controlling Kei. She mustn't disturb it. Her body must not rest immediately. Everything had to gradually calm down.

On top of the drumming of blood bombarding her ears, the sound of friction from the movements of gigantic multi-legs of the city echoed from below. The city's edge was the only place right now that was quiet and secluded enough, a place without people where Nina would not be scolded.

".....Great!"

Gaining control of her breathing, she lifted the iron whips again. In fact, she looked as if she was forcing herself, but she could keep going as long as she extended her Kei through her entire body. She controlled her breathing for that purpose.

Conscious and aware of the place she was standing, the place where Layfon had shown his strength, Nina danced alone with the iron whips.

What could she do to become stronger?

Basic moves flowed into more complicated moves.

When using a weapon, most moves were variations of the three stages of movement: retrieve, hold with increasing strength, and attack. For a sword, it was slash. For a spear or staff, it was stab and hit.

It wasn't meaningless to repeat her moves. While the mind failed to keep up at the other end of the ladder, the body instinctively repeated familiar movements. The repetitive movements increased Nina's physical strength, which would be helpful when she fought.

"Fu.....Ha, ha, ha, ha....."

And then she rested again. Controlling her breathing, she took out a towel from her bag to wipe away her sweat. When the school year started, a bone-chilling cold would immediately cool down the body, but it was better now. Even at night. Zuellni was probably heading towards a warmer climate. Because of that, the heat from Nina's body took some time to dissipate. Irritated at the sweat continuously pouring from her skin, she lifted her head to watch the night sky through the invisible air shield.

And like that, she sat down on the ground.

The cold, hard ground felt good to her. Exhausted and feeling she hadn't the strength to stand up again, she sat there to look at the sky. Only a half moon floated above her, with the endless darkness serving as a backdrop. The existence of the moon seemed to point to the boundary of the night.

The iron whips, turned back into simple Dites, fell to Nina's sides. Still gazing at the moon, she touched them with her fingers. To look at the moon as if reflected in her eyes, she felt for an instant that she could touch it. She didn't reach out a hand. It was embarrassing, and she knew she couldn't possibly touch the moon.

".....It's so far away," she said.

As if it was within reach, but it actually wasn't. The moon existed between illusion and reality. It made people think it was within reach, but it was billions of Jimels away from Nina. Her arm wasn't long enough to touch the moon.

Even so, she thought there must be a way.

If her arm wasn't long enough, then she'd fly up there.....

"Ah....."

She laughed, knowing how ridiculous it was. She couldn't fly in the sky. This dream was meaningless. What was meaningful was her weakness, for wanting to rely on such an unrealistic way to reach the moon.

"This.....Won't do."

She didn't think it was meaningless to repeat the moves she'd learned, as they were directly related to her growth. She had been training like this from the very beginning. The very beginning, when she knew she had discovered Kei and decided to become a Military Artist. She didn't think

she would become strong all of a sudden by repeating the same movements.

Was there a faster way.....?

She understood that was just a wish. A wish not grounded in reality. She couldn't help but think of it though, and that irritated her.

"Damn!"

She should become stronger if she trained at this pace. She believed if she was industrious and put more time and effort into it, she could catch up to Layfon. But how much time would she need to reach his level? One year? Two years? Impossible.....It wasn't that simple.

She had only reached her current level, after living all these years. One or two years of hard work weren't enough for her to catch up to Layfon, who was one, three, probably many more times stronger than her.

And she didn't even have one year.

"I won't make it!"

What she needed wasn't a possibility in the future, but what she could reach for now. To balance the unbalanced 17th platoon, she must become stronger. Only she could make it happen. She had decided to protect Zuellni.

"Can't I make it?"

Her hand slowly moved from the iron whip towards the moon.

Her finger caressed the air and touched the moon before her eyes.

Imagining touch.

Imagining success.

Yet she knew this was meaningless.....

"Ahhhh!"

Watching the hazy moon, she lowered her wrist. Was this bitter regret or jealousy? Facing the Layfon who possessed what she desired.....

And.....That letter.

She had read the letter that had fallen out of the envelope. The impatience and anxiety inside her became more intense after she read the letter, along with her growing desire to catch up to him.

She didn't know what to think of Leerin, the girl who understood Layfon more than Nina did.

Increasing anxiety. Irritation.

"Is this the end?"

She wiped the sweat off her brow and suddenly stood up.

"It can't end here!"

She picked up the iron whips.

The night was still long. Time was limited, but it should be enough. She believed so.....

"HA!"

She started her flow of Kei.



The next platoon match was set for next weekend.

A sigh burst out of Layfon.

He hadn't had a chance to see Nina recently.

It wasn't easy to bump into her as they were in different grades. During training, time passed without giving them room to chat privately, and once training finished, Nina left the room immediately.

They hadn't even met in the Engine Room. Somehow, they had been separated and placed in different groups. They now had different janitorial responsibilities.

Losing the chance to talk to Nina forced him further from the truth. Moreover, he didn't have much spare time as he had to test Harley's invention and attend meetings with Karian and the other Alchemists.

Although he didn't have the time to stand still, he wasn't worried about it.

But–

"How come you seem to be so busy these days?" Mifi asked.

It was now lunch break. They were eating Meishen's special bento on the rooftop of the school building. Long benches lined the metal fences around the rooftop.

"Huh? Do I look that way?"

"Yeah."

".....Mmh," Meishen nodded.

Layfon scratched his head.

"We wanted to hang out with you after you were done with training, but you're always going somewhere. And I specifically picked a time that you didn't have work!"

How did she know his shifts in the Engine Room? Mifi's ability to gather intelligence was terrifying.

"Maybe he's busy because it's almost time for the next platoon match?" Naruki said.

"Huh~~ But I planned to catch Layfon when he wasn't training. Isn't this strange?" Mifi said. Layfon was right before her, but she was indifferent to how she appeared to be gossiping about him.

Besides, Naruki didn't seem to believe the reason she herself gave, as if she only said it to eliminate one possibility and force Layfon to tell the truth.
"Then, what other reasons are there?"

Beautifully shooting down Naruki's guess, Mifi cut straight into the chase.
"Is this secret preparation for the platoon match?"

"Why do you sound suspicious?"

"Eehhhh, why?"

"You're joking."

"I'm not joking. I'm serious."

"Uh?"

Mifi stared at him. He looked down at the bento.

"Have you got a woman?"

".....Why do you think that?"

"Well, you're always with senpai lately. Isn't that right? Senpai stands out a lot, so you can't hide it."

"No, that's not it!" Layfon waved his hands, noticing how Meishen's face had gone white.

"Our dormitories just lie in the same direction."

"So because they're in the same direction, you have dinner with her all the time?"

".....How come you know about that too?"

Yes, since that night at the battle arena, he had had dinner a few times with Felli. It was Karian's treat, but the Student President had never come to dinner with them. Felli was the only one eating with him.

"Don't underestimate my information network!"

It was another arrow to his chest.

"No, it was just a coincidence."

Layfon tried to make up another reason, but he could tell from Mifi's eyes that she was still suspicious.

"Really? Her level of beauty and cuteness is shocking. When two people are alone, don't they just.....start shooting out the energy of youth meaninglessly? Because of a moment of thunder and fire, don't they think they are permitted to do anything and so derail off into the lust of youth?"

".....I'm having trouble following you."

"In other words, have you pushed her down yet?"

"I wish you wouldn't use such clear words....." He shook his head. He hadn't the courage to do such a thing to Felli. No, no, no. He didn't mean he'd do something if he had the courage.....

"So just what are you doing?"

"....."

"Uh.....Is it something you can't talk about?"

"I was asked not to."

Karian asked him to keep it a secret. To students who hadn't fought filth monsters, news of filth monsters in the direct path of the city would be a huge shock to them. Just like in the previous assault, when it was so chaotic within the city that students failed to follow the proper defensive procedures.

They tried to plan better for when the next wave of filth monsters hit, but that couldn't be done overnight. And the only person who could fight back against this threat was Layfon. Hence, it was best to have Layton solve everything while everyone remained ignorant.

"Booooooring."

She stared at him for a while and gave up.

"Mi.....?"

"This is boring. I'm gonna go to eat by myself." She raised a hand and left the rooftop.

"Geez.....She didn't have to throw a tantrum like a kid," Naruki said, standing up."I'm sorry. Please don't be mad."

"No, this is my fault."

"Really.....Maybe, but her demand is unreasonable," Naruki shrugged and looked at the uneasy Meishen.

"I'm going to stay with Mi. Please take care of Mei."

Naruki took her bento and left.

".....Ah."

While Meishen stammered, Naruki disappeared from the rooftop.

(Why do I feel like this has happened before...)

"Sorry," Layfon apologized.

".....You're not the bad one here, Layton." Meishen shook her head like a bell.

"But still, it is my fault."

".....But, you can't tell the truth, can you?"

"....."

He didn't say anything. If he said "yes" then he was admitting that he was hiding something, and if he said he wasn't hiding anything, that would expose him too.

He couldn't say it, but also didn't want to lie.

He didn't want to lie because it was Meishen and her friends, so he could only shrug.

".....I think we shouldn't ask and listen to what can't be told. I feel that if you want to tell us, you'll tell us one day."

".....Thanks."

".....Mi knows that too."

"I hope so."

".....But, Mi is curious." Meishen smiled. Layfon envied the affection in that smile.

".....If Nakki and I had any secrets, Mi would expose them immediately. But she doesn't know what Layton's hiding, and knowing that you don't want her to know frustrates her."

"She feels frustrated because I don't want her to know?"

".....Mi wants a better relationship with you. With her curiosity, she wants to be close enough to you that you can tell her things on your own. If it's Nakki, she'll do what she can quietly, but me....." She shook her head.

".....Especially Nakki, she's impatient too."

"Especially?"

".....Yeah, especially."

"Why?"

"Didn't you help Nakki before? She's impatient because she can't help you out."

"I never knew," Layfon murmured at a loss.

".....Nakki's good at being patient."

"I don't think she has to worry about it. After all, I did get paid," he said, but he knew that wasn't important.

To receive help from someone when she needed it, but unable to help when that person was in trouble. Naruki's feeling of uselessness had nothing to do with Layfon getting paid.

"I see.....Um, so it's my fault."

".....No, it's not Layton's fault."

"No, it's my fault."

For not realizing that Meishen and the girls wanted to get closer to him. That was enough to make him at fault.

Thinking back closely, Meishen didn't use to speak that much when they first met each other. She never talked much, always saying very little and giving snippets of words each time, but she was now talking and taking the initiative to get closer to him.

"Do I look troubled?"

".....Not troubled, more like.....worried?"

"Worried?"

Layfon didn't get it.

".....Sometimes you seem like that." Meishen frowned.

".....Really?"

".....Yeah."

"I see....."

.....And Meishen was always on the verge of tears, but he wouldn't say that even if someone tore his mouth apart.

".....What is it?"

Layfon fell into contemplation.

Worried?

He didn't worry about the filth monsters. There was a high possibility of filth monsters attacking Zuellni. Unable to run away, he had to face the crisis. This feeling was different from worrying. Either way, he was prepared for the reality that filth monsters would come near. Coming back to it, fighting filth monsters was normal in Grendan. Considering that death might become real was indeed a heavy burden, but if he lost to that pressure, he would've died already. To him, the fight of his spirit had already ended.

Then about this worry.....

"Ahah....."

"Huh?"

"Ah.....Hahaha.....So that's why....."

"Huh? Huh?"

"Mi sounded strange, so I got it all wrong."

"Huh!?"

"Ah.....But that can't be helped."

".....Wuwu."

"Uh-?"

Having laughed for a while, Layfon looked at the wall.

".....Layton....." Face white, Meishen's hands were put together tightly, as if she was praying.

"Meishen.....?"

"Um.....Well.....Ar....."

"Ah, Ahah.....No! No.....Nothing. Nothing really. I just got something wrong.....So, please don't cry?"

And as he comforted the trembling Meishen, he told her the truth.



Naruki and Mifi came back to find Layfon comforting a trembling and nervous looking Meishen. In order to explain he wasn't bullying Meishen, Layfon had no choice but to skip his afternoon classes.

Then he told them the entire truth.

"Uh, the captain doesn't look strange....." Mifi nodded as she played with the empty milk packet.

"Is Layton worrying about her?"

Layfon nodded. "Yes."

"So you want to help her?"

"If I can." He nodded simply, burnt out from explaining things to them.

"Why?"

"Why.....?" He sat up straight, surprised by the question.

Both Mifi and Naruki were watching him.

"Because you're both in the same platoon? I thought Layton wasn't interested in the platoon and the platoon matches. If so, then the captain acting weird shouldn't be that bad for you, right?"

".....Mi," Meishen looked at Mifi and Naruki, troubled, then she shook her head as if giving up.

They must have understood something between each other in that split second, but Layfon had no idea what it was. He only knew he was being asked a question.

Why did he have to do something for Nina?

"Is there a need to ask me that difficult a question?"

"Depends on Layton whether it's difficult or not, right?" Naruki said.

"Perhaps," Layfon nodded. Perhaps it wasn't a difficult question, but even if Mifi kept on asking him the same question, he still had no answer to give them.

"Even now, I still don't care about the platoon matches. But my thinking's changed. I want to stay in the platoon until the next real Military Arts competition ends."

"Oh? Is that the awakening of a righteous heart? A little investigation tells me Zuellni's in a crisis. Everyone above the 3rd year knows of it."

"I'm not that good-natured."

"Then what is it?" Mifi said, as if she was reproving him.

"It'll be troubling for me if Zuellni disappears. I can't return to Grendan. If I don't study something here for six years until I graduate, I don't think I can survive in other cities. I don't plan to train in the Military Arts all the way to graduation."

"You're not returning to Grendan?"

Layfon shook his head.

".....You probably know already. My skill in Military Arts doesn't come about through spare training."

"Of course," Naruki shrugged. "If you managed to train up that skill in your spare time, then all the other Military Artists are terribly weak. I guess you had formal training in Military Arts back in Grendan? And you've trained to a level that the Academy City can't teach you anything more in Military Arts. But that's not what I'm concerned with, rather, it's the reality of you wanting to give up Military Arts even though you're so strong."

The three girls watched him, increasing the pressure on him.

They were concerned about his past.

Naruki's mouth moved, preparing to turn her suspicions into clear questions. How should Layfon answer her?

He still didn't think what he did in Grendan was wrong. It didn't go against his sense of morals. But he only knew that what he did had hurt a lot of people.

What would the girls think of him? Shocked? Contemptuous? Would they then leave him?

Thinking of the loneliness made him nervous. How would he feel if Nina found out about it?

".....Isn't this enough?" Meishen said, cutting through his emotions.

"Mei.....?"

".....You wouldn't want to listen to Layton's past now, right?"

"Well....."

"But....."

".....If that's the case, then it's enough, isn't it?" Meishen's repeated question silenced the other two girls.

Layfon's reflection danced in the regret and guilt in Meishen's eyes.

".....Sorry, they.....and I, just want to understand Layfon more."

"No....."

He failed to speak, his chest feeling hot. He didn't know how to express his weaknesses to them, and he was scared of them knowing his past.

(Really? So I'm already so close to these three.)

He was used to hanging out with them, going to class and studying together. This had become a part of his daily life.

He was scared of losing it.

".....I still like the people on the platoon, so I want to help." He squeezed out those words and was left with nothing to say.

He fell silent.

He understood that just like how he was with Meishen and her friends, he was also enjoying the time he spent with Nina, Felli, Sharnid and Harley.

He was afraid of losing them.

".....In that case, I don't have anything to complain about," Mifi said, but still with suspicion in her voice.

"Aah, I was planning to help from the beginning. The only person who didn't want to was Mifi."

"You're lying, Nakki!"

"I was never suspicious of Layton!"

"Liar. You were concerned too!"

"My concern's not the same as your concern."

"They're the same."

"No."

"The same!"

"No."

"Nakki was concerned about it. Definitely, definitely, definitely concerned about the captain, Felli-senpai and that letter....."

"Aaa

Meishen suddenly shouted, her face all red. Everyone stared at her, dumbstruck.

"M,Mei...?"

".....!"

Her shoulders heaving, Meishen quickly covered her mouth with her hands.

"Ah....."

"So-Sorry....."

".....Uu....." Tears filled her eyes.

(And I thought I could apologize.)

Meishen had been trying to find an opening to apologize for reading his letter.

But not under these circumstances.....

Tears flooded down her cheeks.

This time Layfon was chased away. At a distance, he watched Mifi and Naruki comfort Meishen. Sometimes they said something wrong and made the situation worse. At other times, they mentioned the past and Meishen looked even worse at that. Meishen got angry, and was comforted, and like that the process repeated itself.....

Meishen.....When the three girls had calmed down, the bell signaling the end of class rang out.

The bell of the last class.



Although they did agree on it, he never thought they'd really come.

"Well then, let me explain our mission."

It was now night, or more like it was almost dawn. Everywhere was still dark and dim, but the sun would rise in two to three hours. They couldn't have stayed awake all night, so they should have been sleeping till now.

Mifi's hair was tangled, the sign of a sleepyhead.

"No, this isn't really a mission," Naruki said to Mifi, who, for some reason, was wearing a long coat and sunglasses.

When the workers had finished cleaning the Engine Room, Meishen, Naruki and Mifi were already waiting for Layfon outside the entrance.

The quartet's breath came out as steam. Meishen had hot tea in her thermos. Everyone enjoyed the hot liquid thankfully.

"Where's the captain?"

"The class leader's called her over. She should still be inside."

"Good. We'll wait here then tail her," Mifi smiled deviously, cupping the cup as steam from the hot tea rose to fog up her sunglasses.

"I think she'll go back to bed like usual....." Layfon said, uncomfortable with her expression.

"Oh, I've been observing her. She trains until it's time to work, so if anything happens, it must happen after work."

"Huh? Has she been training?"

"Yeah, it's pretty scary too, when she trains."

"It's like she's another person."

If even Naruki said so, then the training must have been intense.

"....."

She canceled her training with him, but continued to train by herself.

"I see."

"Hm? What?"

"Uh, nothing."

That confirmed his suspicions.

He glanced at Naruki. She seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion.

".....Ah," called Meishen softly. Everyone looked at the entrance.

Nina was coming out.

Breathing out steamy breaths, cold and shivering, Nina only wore her Military Arts uniform. Did she come straight from the Engine Room without returning to the dormitory? Her work-suit probably was inside the bag she carried. Layfon remembered that Nina had that bag with her when she came to team training.

Even the scattering street light, dim as it was, couldn't cover the shadows of exhaustion on Nina's face, but her pace while walking didn't show her fatigue.

Layfon drained the tea in his cup and tossed the cup into a bin. The four of them waited for Nina to walk ahead a bit before following after her.

Layfon and Naruki decided on how far they had to stay behind Nina. If left to Mifi and Meishen, they'd have been discovered already. Although that was his conclusion, Nina's appearance changed his judgment. Mifi might tail her well even by herself. A kind of tension surrounded Nina, but it looked more like an old wire fence to him. A fence with lots of openings.

"She's very tired," Naruki said in a low voice. Layfon nodded.

What had pushed Nina to this stage? Was it because they lost the platoon match? Could it have been that big of a shock to her? He wasn't sure. No, perhaps he did know. He had tasted failure in Grendan. In order to survive, it was important for him to win again and again. The important point wasn't his life and death, but more his being afraid of encountering a stumbling block in the process of doing what he wanted to do.

Was this the feeling that Nina held?

.....Sure. She wanted to protect this city from harm. She said that to him not long ago.

".....She's going somewhere?"

"Probably."

Troubled expressions adorned Meishen and Mifi's faces.

Nina continued towards the outskirts of the city.

The edge of the city was a danger zone, a zone where emergencies tended to arise, so residential and any important buildings were usually built further in from the city's boundary. On the other hand, any buildings close to the danger zone were rented out cheaply.

Layfon didn't know the exact location of Nina's dormitory, but he could guess from the direction she headed after training and cleaning in the Engine Room that her dormitory did not lie on the city's edge.

Nina finally arrived in a clearing devoid of buildings.

The sound coming from the movements of the city's multi-legs rode the wind. Layfon and the girls hid in a forested area. This place was a bit far from the roaming bus station. All they could see was the wind carrying pollutant, a sandstorm rioting outside the air shield.

The wind tonight was especially strong. The sandstorm in the dark looked like some stirring creature.

Meishen held tightly to Layfon's sleeve.

A hazy sky blocked out the traces of the moon. The cloud cover must be very thick.

Nina walked down some stairs to the middle of an amphitheater and dropped the bag from her shoulders.

She took hold of the Dites in her harness.



"Restoration," she said softly. At that sound, a familiar feeling ran through Layfon.

She readied her fighting stance. Layfon knew she'd then breathe in deeply and allow the Kei to flood her body.

The iron whips struck downwards or to the sides. She received, let the pressure slide off a side, and struck back at an imaginary enemy.

Nina's body spun left and right, sometimes staying in one place as if defending against repeated heavy strikes, sometimes running forward as if attacking, charging in.

Nina practiced all the moves she knew.

There was no delay or hesitation in her movements. Each move flowed smoothly into the next.

It was an Art, and it had a frightening air.

All three girls except Layfon were holding their breath.

Nina was like a first class dancer, showing every scene of the world in her movements. At the same time, she was like a mad fighter, fighting against everything in the world.

Meishen and the other two girls had already seen Nina training last night, but watching her for a second time did not reduce their amazement. They watched her wordlessly.

Layfon fixed his gaze on Nina, watching the light of Kei emitting from her. Her flow of Kei was brighter than the Kei she showed in team training. But unlike the first time, when Nina's Kei was so dazzling that he could not look directly at her, a shadow now traced her Kei.

It was meaningless to judge one's strength by the light of Kei, since the two held no relation to each other.

Layfon wasn't sure whether he should be happy or not about the change in Nina's flow of Kei.

He was just saddened for some reason.

The remaining Kei dispersed from her body like steam, giving off light and floating up into air as of something finally being released. From her fingertips, shoulders, neck, head, back, toes.....The remaining Kei shook

like strings. The strings wove together to become one and stretched out to the sky like something struggling against a force too heavy to resist.

What a tragic scene.

And that was where her problem lay.

"What a mess," Layfon murmured, earning wide-eyed stares from his companions.

".....Layton?"

"Huh? But I think she's amazing.....?" Mifi asked and looked at Naruki. Naruki didn't seem to understand Layfon. She wore a perplexed expression.

"Is something wrong?"

"The problem's not with the Kei flow or her movements....." No, that 'was' the problem. Internal-type Kei would not strengthen the entire body. What it did was coordinate a person's movements and cause changes accordingly, making the moves faster and stronger. It was a type of training like Whirl Kei, generating sudden and speedy changes. But in Nina's training, there were many redundant moves.

Layfon didn't want to point that out. Her weakness could be improved, given more training.

"It's not a problem that she trains by herself. Military Artists are always lonely. One must face oneself and struggle hard to become strong. Nobody can help you, and it's not something you'll ask someone for help with, but....." he shook his head.

How could he put it? He hadn't yet organized his own emotions, so no words surfaced in his mind. He failed to find suitable words.

"She's too reckless," he said in the end.

The way she dispersed her Kei was like she was drowning, struggling to hold onto anything, even a bunch of wheat, but even so, it still wasn't enough to escape the flood.

She could only sink.

What would happen if she continued to sink.....

".....If she keeps this up, she'll break."

"Yes....." Naruki nodded in realization.

Nina had classes and training in the Military Arts course, then team training after class and individual training after that, janitorial duties in the Engine Room after all of that and then individual training again.....Just when did she sleep? Did she get enough rest? Looking at her, she had probably spent most of her time training alone when she wasn't at her work.

But she would pay a huge price later.

In Grendan, Layfon once had to fight filth monsters for an entire week. A whole week without time to sleep and rest. A week that took away his awareness of time. In the end, he was so debilitated that he couldn't lift a single finger. No matter how he lied to his body, his biological clock went crazy afterward. A twist of the normal pattern appeared. He spent two whole weeks resting before he could return to duty.

".....We must stop her," Meishen said.

Layfon agreed. But how? It was easy to say you'd damage your body.....But Nina knew that too.

Layfon knew training was not enough for Nina to reach what she wanted, and he didn't know what advice to give in that area. Sure, he knew on a basic level how one became strong. The head of the orphanage was the first person to teach him the way of the Katana.

Nobody was born with an innate understanding of the Military Arts.

But teaching Nina the Katana wasn't what she needed.

She needed better training in the basics, but.....

Layfon couldn't teach her his training in Kei flow. He had already passed that phase of needing someone to teach him how to handle the flow of Kei at a very young age. He could teach Nina some simple steps, but he didn't have the confidence to teach the deeper theories. He knew his own knowledge in this area wasn't an easy thing for others to obtain.

Maybe it'd be presumptuous of him to say this, but what he meant was the ability of a genius. It would be difficult to pass on all of his instincts, instincts that a genius possessed and made real. And as such, none of the

other Heaven's Blade Receivers had apprentices. All they did was concentrate on their own training.

"We're the rarest of the rare, special and strange. We're humans but not entirely humans. Even if we pass on our knowledge, it'd only be one-thousandth, one-ten thousandth, one-billionth. We're those kinds of people, off the beaten path."

Lintence had said that when Layfon was slowly getting the hang of how to control the steel threads technique.

"I taught you this skill as a small experiment. You've reached one-thousandth of my level, but it isn't possible for you to get any better at it. Even if you can control billions of steel threads, they still aren't as sharp as the point of your Katana. It's better for you to use the Katana when you're in a crisis."

Layfon wasn't disappointed at those words. He understood and accepted it. This reality hadn't changed. He felt the running of his Kei flow the best when he held a Katana – not steel threads.

Why was there a difference? He couldn't pass on his skill to Nina when he was unable to explain his own skill.

He shook his head. She would have asked him already if she had wanted to learn from him.

".....Layton?"

Against Meishen's question, he had no idea how to show them his helplessness at Nina's situation.

"Can't we do anything?"

He shook his head.

"Probably.....No, I don't know. We can tell her she's training too recklessly, that she'll seriously injure her body; but is there a purpose to this? There's something she wants to achieve even though she's like this. I find it meaningless to tell her to stop training when we can't help her at all."

Nina wanted to become stronger.

She had always wanted to become stronger. This wasn't some sudden idea of hers.

But.....

"Why's she only doing this now? Because she lost the match? Is that all?" Mifi asked reflexively.

Layfon couldn't think of any other reason, but doubt remained. Was that all, really?

".....I think I understand," Naruki said.

They all looked at her.

"This is how I felt when I asked for Layton's help awhile ago. Layton's too strong, so I feel that I can't fight beside you. I don't know how to feel about this other than that. You can say that's how Military Artists think. This feeling is lonely and regretful.....Frankly, I'm also jealous. The feeling of only being able to rely on another's power is hard, especially for me as a Military Artist. I think it's harder for her as the captain of the team that you're in."

Listening to that reminded Layfon of Sharnid testing his new Dite.

Though Sharnid had laughed, saying that sniping was not enough for him, that might not have been the only reason. Did Sharnid ask Harley to make him new Dites because of the feeling that Naruki held? And Nina too?

No, she must be criticizing herself even more intensely than Sharnid, right? Because she strongly wanted to save this city.....

"If that's the case, then I don't have anything to say....."

It was natural for a Military Artist to want to become strong.

".....But why?" Meishen said.

"Hmm?" Layfon responded. Meishen, not being a Military Artist herself, wouldn't understand.....He could think that about her, but the way she voiced her suspicion sounded like more than mere doubt.

Meishen said something vague, but changed her mind. ".....I know the captain wants to be stronger, but why can't Layton do anything? Why does Layton have to do anything?"

At first, he didn't understand what she was getting at.

".....The captain wants to become stronger so she can win, right? Does she want the entire platoon to become strong? In that case, it's not just Layfon, but everyone together....."

Was it alright to become stronger alone or was it better to become stronger together? Which one was it? Layfon thought that it was the same either way.

"Together?" he asked.

Meishen nodded, her face all red.

"Together....."

"What's so strange about that?" Mifi asked.

He felt as if something was stuck in his throat, preventing him from speaking.

"I see, it's that simple....." Naruki said, touching her chin.

Something sounded strange. The sound of flowing Whirl Kei had stopped.

Layfon was the first to look over, then Naruki and the other two girls.

Nina had fainted.



It didn't take long to get to the hospital. Layfon had carried Nina to the hospital and the medical students on the night shift had quickly prepared a room for them. The doctor that had been napping came over to do a simple checkup and ordered the nurses to get someone over and prepare an IV. During this time, Layfon had called Harley, and as he was about to return to the patient's room he met Naruki, Mifi and Meishen.

It was now another shift. A different doctor was checking up on Nina. The nurses had changed Nina into patient clothes that were open at the back.

The doctor was placing needles into Nina's back.

"He specializes in Kei vein treatment," the nurse said to Layfon.

"Is this 3rd year Nina Antalk!?" the doctor said, displeased. Could it be because of sleepiness? His eyes looked quite sleepy.

Layfon nodded.

"I never thought a 3rd year in Military Arts could faint in such a stupid way."

"Is it serious?"

"There's a decreasing level of function in her internal organs. She lacks nutrients and has overworked her muscles.....Anyway, everything about her is weak. The simple cause is the overworking of the Kei vein."

As expected.

"Kei can strengthen body functions and speed up healing, but the source of the Kei vein is the flow caused by human activities. Military Artists have a special organ to generate Kei flow, but the basics are the same. No, to a Military Artist, this is the same as increasing their weakness, because that organ is the same as a heart or a brain. If it's damaged, then they might die," the doctor said as he placed more tiny needles into Nina's back. From her waist going upward, as if the needles were mapping out some sort of a terrain.

"Even if the brain's damaged, one can still live in a vegetative state. If a heart's damaged, we can give them an artificial heart. But this is the only organ that is irreplaceable. If the Kei vein is damaged beyond repair, then it's over. I think I said that already in class, that it has to be looked after carefully," he said, continuing to place tiny needles on his patient's back. Although there weren't any professionals in the Academy City, this doctor's skill seemed reliable enough.

"Can she be cured?"

"This isn't fatal. I'm using acupuncture to strengthen her flow of Kei."

Layfon relaxed.

"But she can't move for now, and she can't participate in the next platoon match."

".....Really?"

"Hum? You don't seem shocked?"

"That type of thing means nothing to me."

"It seems like that rumor of the newbie of the 17th platoon being a weirdo really is true."

So there was such a rumor? The needles spread from the waist to Nina's fingernail and heels.

The doctor placed the last needle on Nina's left heel, and massaged his shoulders.

The nurses adjusted the air-conditioner and left the room.

Nina continued to sleep. Layfon's fast and irregular breathing had now calmed down. A relaxed sigh escaped his mouth, and he remembered the three girls waiting in the corridor. He went out to tell them Nina was all right, that they could go home first. It was almost dawn and the girls also had class next.

"What about Layton?"

"I'll stay here a bit then go."

".....Is there anything you need?" Meishen asked.

Layfon didn't understand what she meant.

".....She'll need things, staying in the hospital."

"Ah....."

"Layfon won't be able to prepare everything. We'll bring the things after class."

"Thanks."

"Aah, that's all we can do for her," Mifi said as he escorted them to the lobby.

And he saw Harley.

Representing the other two, who weren't here, Harley's face was stiff and green. "How's Nina?"

"She's sleeping."

"I see.....Is she all right?"

"She won't be able to participate in the next match."

"That can't be helped," Harley said without resistance. He sighed, relaxed after knowing Nina was all right. "Don't you think it's a shame?"

"What's important is the real match, right?"

"True."

Harley's reply gave Layfon courage. To Layfon, the platoon match wasn't at all important, but he wasn't sure whether Nina felt the same.

"I've contacted the other two. I think they'll be here soon.....But they aren't the hasty types, huh?" Harley shrugged, not at all criticizing their slowness.

They returned to the patient's room. Harley gasped at the needles covering her body, but he breathed out slowly after seeing her sleeping face.

And suddenly directed his gaze to the wall. His face turned red.

"Can we cover her?"

".....The nurses didn't. If we do it ourselves, it seems....."

Layfon understood Harley's meaning, and he also felt heat creeping up his own face.

After knocking quietly on the door, Felli walked in.

".....What're you doing?" she asked coolly, her gaze sweeping across Nina, her underclothes illuminated by the light, and the two young men.

Losing interest at her tongue-tied teammates, Felli observed Nina's face. After confirming that Nina was all right, she once again put her face closer to the captain's.

Felli was in uniform. It was not yet dawn, but neither her hair nor uniform showed signs of her having slept.

Layfon was peeking at the two girls. Felli moved her gaze away and looked at him.

He hastily moved his gaze back to the wall.

"Pervert."

"I didn't see anything."

"Giving that response means you're a pervert."

Unable to fight back, he could only moan.

"Never mind, that's not important. What's important is....." Her gaze landed on Harley, then she took out a big envelope from her bag.

"My brother gave me this."

Layfon read the letter.

He had already guessed the contents of the letter before Felli opened the envelope. And after observing Harley's reaction, stiffening and recovering and then looking at Nina, Layfon understood more.

Back at the bed, Felli was checking whether Nina was truly asleep.

Inside the envelope was a photo.

"This is the second image from the drone."

The image was the same as the last one, but it was clearer and sharper. Maybe because it was closer to the city.

That thing was fastened high on the face of a mountain. Was it sleeping? Its wings were folded, laying on top of each other. Its body was curled up.

A filth monster.

It was a male.....In which phase? Layfon couldn't judge from the photo.

If only it would continue to sleep; but this hope was far from possible.

"Has the city.....Has Zuellni changed direction?"

When a city detected a filth monster, it'd take evasive action. Every mobile city acted this way, including Zuellni.

Felli shook her head. "Zuellni's still heading straight in that direction. At this rate, it'll encounter the filth monster the day after tomorrow."

The day after tomorrow.....Was the weekend, and the day of the platoon match. It appeared that the 17th platoon would have to give up on the match.

Layfon sighed. He put the photo back inside the envelope and returned it to Felli.

"The Dite's ready. You can use it anytime," Harley said.

"The combat gear for external use is ready. My brother wants you to depart tomorrow night if possible."

"I understand."

"Are you afraid?" Felli suddenly asked.

"Hm?"

"Of fighting the filth monster."

"Well....."

Of course he was afraid. That line touched his lips but did not leave them. It wasn't because he thought he'd lose face by confirming his fear, but he hesitated at the expectation and hope in Felli's eyes.

"It's a bit late for you to be asking that question."

"That's.....true."

As if imitating Layfon, wanting to say something and deciding not to, Felli's lips opened and closed. She sighed, a sigh of one who knew how many times cuter and more beautiful that sigh could be.

"Can't you stop.....?" she murmured. Confirming Nina's condition once more, she left the room.

Chapter 5: Things in life

The tight armor-suit felt cool on his skin. The suits looked like they'd be heavy and hot on the outside, but didn't feel hot after he put them on. They had surprisingly good ventilation. He had worn something like this back in Grendan. Wearing the suit wasn't new to him.

Under the light, one could just make out the color of his skin beneath the sheer cloth used for filtering pollutants outside the city.

The fitting was done at the last moment, as this was his first time wearing this suit.

He left the fitting room.

"It feels fine," Layfon said.

He was underneath the city, inside what was called the waist of the city, located beneath the Engine Room and connected to the multi-legs. A space that was basically a gap.

A lot of work, mostly involving the maintenance of the multi-legs, started and ended here.

And in here right now were Layfon, Karian and a couple other students.

The student leader of the technology course let out a relieved sigh. On his face were traces of sleepless nights.

"That's great, next is the helmet....."

The helmet was made of two parts. The hard component that made up the outer part of the helmet pressed down on the same material as the cloth that made up the armored suit. The cloth was cut according to the contours of Layfon's face. Once he put on the helmet, his face was sealed from the outside world. Lastly, the student leader connected the piece of cloth hanging out from beneath the helmet to the suit to cover Layfon's neck.

Nothing illuminated the helmet. In total darkness, the Student President sent out a signal to someone through his transmitter.

A scene of somewhere else appeared before Layfon.

Barren earth greeted Layfon's eyes.

"Oh....."

Right before him was the desolate and sterile earth, with cracks like spider webs across its surface. The dry smell of the earth drifted into his nose. Wind filled with a huge amount of sand beat against Layfon as it blew past him.....Like an illusion, the clear images coming through the helmet gave him the feeling that he was seeing things with his own eyes and feeling things with his own body.

"Does it work?"

Felli's voice.

But she wasn't beside him.

"Perfect."

"That's good," came the cool reply.

The helmet was connected to Felli's flakes. They replaced Layfon's vision and conveyed to him all kinds of information. This way, he wouldn't have to see the world with his own eyes and risk burning them through contact with the pollutants, and he would also avoid the inconvenience of the sand sticking onto the helmet and obstructing his vision.

"Then everything's prepared."

In his harness hung the Dite he got from Harley. It differed from the normal Dite in that it was slightly longer. A small and thin slab of metal curved inward from the handle, and on it were three holes.

This was the completed version of the Adamantium Dite.....And its inventor still hadn't shown up.

Lastly, Layfon equipped himself with four more Dites.

"Please use the bike," Karian pointed at the thing beside him.

It was a vehicle from the past that had long since lost its original function. Its design was wide but delicate. Underneath the dim light, liquid silver ran across its black outer shell.

The rubber wheels could not be used on the barren earth. Long distances were out of the question, and there was little meaning in making or using the wheels for short distances only. The obvious conclusion was to adjust the design in a way that was similar to how the robotic legs moved. Even

so, its movement far exceeded the speed of robotic legs. Every city had a few of these bikes for emergencies.

The seat for the person needing rescue had been taken off this bike.

Layfon took his seat and switched on the engine. A low rumble sounded out from beneath the vehicle as the bike vibrated.

Karian and the others went to the control room, and the gate leading to the outside world opened. A lift lowered Layfon to the ground.

Furious wind and the city's slowly moving multi-legs surrounded Layfon. As the lift descended, he gazed at the mountain protruding from the ground far away.

The filth monster was there.

It would take him one day to get there.....The long and lonely journey began.



Time rewinds to just a short while before Layfon's departure. This was the hospital room.

"This is....."

At the voice that sounded lost, Layfon looked away from the vase. It was Nina. The nurse had removed the needles from her back, turned her over and pulled a blanket over her. The remaining light of the sunset shone through the window. Light and shadow separated the room into two colors. Except for the dusky red on Nina's bed, everywhere else was dim.

Layfon turned on the light. It reflected off the whitewashed walls and shooed away the darkness. Nina squinted at the dazzling light and saw Layfon's silhouette.

"This is the hospital."

"Hospital.....?"

"Don't you remember?"

".....Uh....."

She slowly shook her head as she watched the ceiling, followed by a light sigh. The sound of quiet movements from nurses, patients and visitors outside the room caused small vibrations in the air.

Layfon looked at the vase again. In it sat Sharnid's flowers.

"I see, so I fainted."

"You overused your Kei, senpai."

Layfon felt suffocated at the sparseness of the conversation. Nina gradually reached the logical conclusion she didn't want to acceptA premonition of her struggling to escape and failing at it.

"Were you watching?" she said.

Watching the vase, Layfon felt her gaze stab one side of his face, but the Nina at the edge of his vision was looking at the window painted red by the sunset.

"No."

"Do you find me ridiculous?"

"I didn't laugh."

"But I want to laugh at myself."

He sensed the blanket move a little.

"I'm so unsightly....."

"I don't think so."

"Why?" Irritation filled her question. Mixed in it was also the sound of crying, but he didn't attempt to confirm that. Perhaps.....He didn't want to look at the Nina gazing at the sunset.

"This might seem cruel, but I think some things can only be understood after a near-death experience. No one can help with that."

"And this is one of them?" she asked in a mocking tone. Mocking herself.

Layfon nodded.

".....We have to give up on the next platoon match."

".....I see."

She must have understood it.

"Did I waste my time?"

"Waste?"

"I want to win and become stronger. In that case, haven't I been wasting my time?"

"Have you lost just because you can't participate in the next match?"

"That's not it!" As she tried to sit up, her face twisted. Her entire body hurt so much that she couldn't even sit up properly. She lay back down heavily, the pillow supporting the sudden weight of her head.

".....Even so, I still want to win and get stronger. If I stop here and can't do anything in the real match, then nothing else is worth mentioning."

"True."

"So haven't I been wasting my time?"

She didn't turn to him. Inside the blanket, her body seemed to become smaller.

".....At first, I thought it would be enough if I used my own strength and helped out Zuellni in the next Military Arts competition," she said softly, still not turning to face him. "But I got a bit greedy. Because you're so strong. I was scared when I first witnessed it. I wondered whether you were even human, but when I confirmed you were, desire came to me. I didn't want just to help, I wanted to become the driving force, the core of victory. I thought the 17th platoon had become stronger even though there was no proof of it. If you want to laugh, then go ahead."

Layfon shook his head solemnly.

"But I lost the match. Of course. And I feel it was fortunate that we lost. That match corrected my error, but I stopped moving forward after that.....If that's the case, what do I have to do to win?"

The team needed to become stronger.

The answer was simple, but Layfon didn't voice it.

He understood a little of Nina's line of thinking. Sharnid had a lukewarm attitude, and Felli clearly had no interest at all.

Especially because Felli told him that she wouldn't use her true strength. She hated herself for being a psychokinesist.

The strength of a team showed in their coordination. It was meaningless for only one person to be strong.

The opposing team had demonstrated this truth in the previous match.

"I thought only I needed to become strong. Even if I can't fight alongside you, at least I can be strong enough not to become a burden, so....."

So she increased the time spent training herself?

The unusual training schedule meant she had a high evaluation of Layfon's strength.

"But I might have wasted my time."

Something quiet and heavy pushed down on the air in the room.

".....Does senpai know about the irregularity in your Kei breathing?"

"Huh?"

"I mean the breath of Kei. Senpai was very painful in that last moment."

"Ah, Aah....."

The sudden change in topic confused her.

"The irregularity of your Kei breath shows you've wasted your training, to a certain point. It's natural for that to happen because you lie to your body and, despite your exhaustion, you continued to use Kei. This is the same theory as how one can't breathe in at will while exercising. When a person first breathes with Kei, the Kei vein generates an amount of Kei that's larger than usual. The training method for the Kei vein is different from how you increase the capacity of your lungs. In the final phase of Kei training, you can live your daily life using the breath of Kei without having to use Internal- and External-type Kei."

"Layfon.....?"

"It's hard work to maintain the Kei breath without generating a Kei flow, but if that can be done, then it'll increase the person's sensitivity to her Kei and the amount of Kei she holds. It's like the Kei becomes your nervous system. Kei breathing is the foundation of using Kei."

Kei breathing is the foundation of using Kei.

That was explained in the junior textbook in Military Arts.

But he had said something that wasn't included in the textbook. None of the textbooks mentioned maintaining a daily life with Kei breathing.

"If humans with a Kei vein want to survive by relying on Military Arts, then it's meaningless to live the same as normal people. They breathe differently, so the meanings are different. Please look at the flow of Kei as more important than blood. Believe the information from the Kei flow more than what you feel from your nervous system. Don't become a blood bag that thinks, but please become a formless body of Kei that thinks," he said lightly.

Nina remained silent and inert as she listened. She watched him with surprise, her eyes slightly red.

"If you want to live by the Military Arts, then give up trying to live as a human."

He said that to the Nina who was at ease because he was a human – don't live as humans do.

"That's all I can tell senpai," he smiled. It was a forced smile, so it must have looked quite stiff. He could feel the hard muscles of his face.

"Have you noticed? Sharnid-senpai has a new Dite."

"Huh?"

"He seems to know how to use Close Quarters Gun Combat. I don't know what level he's at. You can check later. Perhaps we can have more variation in strategies now. But all the formations we've used so far have used everyone to attack; maybe you can do it another way and stay at the back. My brain's terrible with strategies, and they probably aren't right, so I have to leave it to Senpai."

"....."

"I'm good at fighting alone, but I'm terrible when fighting in a team. It's not easy to fight while thinking of the comrades fighting alongside me. Frankly, I feel that the battle arena is too small."

"Layfon....."

"Please give me orders, and I'll try to act them out to the best of my ability. Sharnid-senpai seems to have his own thinking on this. As for Felli-senpai.....Well, let's work hard together."

He stammered out those last words, so he laughed to cover them.

"It's all up to senpai whether we can become the strongest platoon, so please don't abandon us."

"Abandon you.....How could I....."

Nina recalled her recent actions.

Yes, it wasn't strange to think she had abandoned them when she was training to become strong by herself.

"Yeah.....I have nothing to say."

"I'm not against senpai getting stronger. I'll help out the best I can if there's anything I can do. Although all I can do is teach you how to train your Kei.....If you can find anything more useful than this, then learn from me as much as you can."

He smiled, a bit embarrassed. This time his smile might have been even stiffer. Please don't abandon us.....That felt just like a kid not wanting to part with someone.

Had he come to like the 17th platoon this much.....? Without knowing himself.....?

Or was it because of.....her?

He didn't want to leave Nina Antalk?

(Which is it?)

He wasn't sure himself.

"I see.....So I'm the only one who's wavering."

Her soft voice stopped his train of thought.

"We're comrades, so let's get stronger together."

He couldn't deny the other him who was happy thanks to the intense light in her eyes.



"It was like you were saying your last words."

"Huh?"

The bike moved forward, bumping across the deserted earth. He was already driving on the smoothest surface, but he wasn't sure what good it did. He'd had training back in Grendan for driving, but he had never driven for so long a distance. There was a spare tire. If possible, he didn't want to encounter a situation where he had to use it.



The sun had sunk down in the west. The headlights cut out a circle from the darkness around him.

As long as he got the location right, he'd arrive there, so he constantly checked the compass on the bike's dashboard as he drove.

And Felli was guiding him, so things shouldn't be confusing.

He still hadn't taken any action at this distance regarding the filth monster. One reason was because of the limited preparation time and movement, but the main reason was his need to coordinate with Felli's information.

Felli's voice came through the flake on his helmet. "I heard.....What you said in the hospital room."

"Those weren't my last words," he laughed.

"But it's not strange to think so in this situation, right?"

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"But I don't plan to lose."

"You didn't say you wouldn't die."

"I don't know anything besides the fact that the filth monster is male. I can't say what isn't certain."

"See?"

He felt the low howling of the wind through his armor-suit. The pollutants beat against him.

On the other side of the skin-thin suit lay a dead world.

Nothing lived except the filth monsters. On the barren earth, shards of soil jutted from the ground. Pollution poisoned the air. Contact with pollutants would cause burns, the skin peeling off in flakes. If one breathed in the air, one's lungs would rot.

One person was in this dead world.

The uneasy feeling of being in a place he shouldn't be invaded Layfon.

He had fought in this dead world numerous times, fighting continuously in an arena that was far wider and vaster than any city, but filled with a sense of suffocation. Was he truly alive right now? Even that feeling of "Of course I'm alive" was fading.

His mission was all that kept him going in this place, so when he faced battle, he always felt his life was somewhere far, far away from him.

"I don't plan to say my last words here," he repeated.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Fon Fon....."

He almost crashed.

"Have you really decided on that name?" Embarrassed at the nickname that didn't suit the current atmosphere, he steadied the vehicle.

"I've decided."

There was stubbornness in her icy voice.

"Can you not use that name?"

"No.....I remember. We were deciding on something to call me. How did we end up deciding on your nickname?"

".....Don't ask me."

He didn't even get a say in the name of Fon Fon.

"Ah.....I get it, because my brother showed up. He has to interfere in everything I do. My emotionless and tearless brother is the cause of my misfortune. I pray daily that he'll be forced to withdraw because he's been exposed using public funds for private purposes and other crimes he's committed."

"What are you saying....."

Her solemn expression surfaced in his mind.

"Then you decide."

"Now?"

"I'm bored, so you can either talk to me, or you can make some funny jokes?"

Yes, there was still some time before he reached his destination.

"Um, I can't, but....."

"Please don't make jokes. I'll get a headache if you turn into Sharnid-senpai."

".....Then what do I do?"

"Just think of what to call me."

"Um....."

"Hurry....."

He was troubled. Anyway, all he needed was to say what he thought.

".....Felli-chan?"

"I'm already used to that. I've been called that since I was very little. Use more creativity. This name's denied."

"Felli-chi?"

"I feel like a moron. Rejected."

Then what about when Meishen was called Mei-chi? But he didn't say that to Felli. Recently, he had been calling her Mei. Speaking of which, that was how he called Naruki too, but that seemed different.....

"Felli-chon."

"Is that even meaningful? Rejected."

"Felli-yan."

"My name is not a joke. Rejected."

"Felli-lin."

"Are you laughing?"

"Felli Felli."

"I hate rehash. Rejected."

"Fffen."

"Sounds like a strange laugh. Rejected."

"Fernandez."

"Who's that? Rejected."

"Felli-tan."

"Do you want to die~? Rejected."

".....Sorry, I give up."

"You're not permitted to give up."

What should he do.....He wanted to hold his head. Besides, the name was usually shortened or changed to add variations to its tone. Or he could use some similar thing as an analogy.....

"....."

"What?"

"Nothing."

He decided not to say she was a cold, bloodless doll. That would definitely hurt.

"Please hurry," she urged. His head felt like stone. He couldn't think of anything else.

(Fe?.....What is that?)

If he shortened her name, it became some strange sound. What if like Naruki became Fekki? How strange.

"Hurry up. What's with you?"

"Felli," he said in resignation. There were no variations and no comparisons.

Just her original name. Perhaps that sounded rough. Even so, he couldn't help it. He had no other ideas.

(How about that?)

"....."

".....Say it again."

"Um.....Felli."

"Mm....."

Felli's image wasn't displayed in the helmet, but he felt he saw her. Her right hand caressed her chin, left hand supporting her right elbow, her head slightly cocked, her gaze lightly stroking the sky above her.....This image of her surfaced in his mind.

"It's not creative at all, and you didn't put any effort into it. No respect for your senpai at all, and there's no affection for me. It's so bad that you can't call it a name."

So that didn't work.....Well.....

Layfon tried to think of another name, but instead was surprised by what Felli said next.

"Never mind, we'll just use that."

"Heh?" He was rather shocked, then glad of her letting him go.

"But you have to say it with more emotion. I don't need the respect for a senpai though. Call me that from now on, okay?"

"Uh...Um..."

"Well, Fon Fon. Say it again."

"Ah, yes.....Felli."

"Good."

Layfon relaxed.

"Promise me."

".....What?"

"Call me that from now on, ok?"

"Uh, in front of others too?"

"Of course."

"And Fon Fon too?"

"Sure."

"Sorry, please forgive me."

If he was called Fon Fon during team training and after school.....

(No.....No No NO!)

That would be so embarrassing.

"Fine, then I'll call you Fon Fon when we're alone."

He could truly relax now.

"In exchange for that, I'll add one more condition."

"Yes, leave it to me," Layfon said, not really having heard what Felli had just said. He'd agree to any request as long as she didn't call him Fon Fon in front of everyone.

"Please remember to call me by that name when you return."

"....."

"It's a promise."

Those were the last words; Felli stopped talking after that.

He took a quick nap before dawn. The swaying of his body stuck to him like echoes. And like that, he lay on the vehicle and closed his eyes.

The wind had died down and everywhere looked dead. He didn't know what Felli was doing on the other end of the flakes. She hadn't spoken to him for a while now.

It was really quiet, as if even his own voice had died off. When he moved slightly, the sound of Dites bumping against the bike shook his eardrums. On the other hand, the feeling of him being alive was more intense than ever.

He knew there was no such thing, but that feeling came unbidden to him. He had no one beside him, no one to help him. The people living in Zuellni were far behind him, and he had no idea where the other cities were.

What was Leerin doing?

This flashed through his mind.

After the attack on Zuellni, he had only written one letter to Leerin. He felt that he was waiting for a return letter from somewhere. It wasn't that strange that he still hadn't received a letter. The roaming buses hadn't delivered any letters, so the mail would probably come soon.

He candidly told her about the current Layfon in that letter. How he was forced to transfer into the Military Arts, enter a platoon and fight the larvae.....And his inability to give up on the Military Arts. What would Leerin think? Would she smile bitterly and say "Can't be helped since it's you," or would she lecture him with a pink face.....

The harness swayed and the Dites jostled against each other.

(I.....am quite afraid of being alone.)

He deeply thought that. He used to write to Leerin every week, but he hadn't been doing that now. One reason was his losing the fresh and curious feeling he had when he first started school. The second reason was that Leerin didn't write as much in her letters to him. He felt a distance between them.

He hadn't received a letter from Leerin since her last letter.

(It must be the distance between cities.)

In the time when cities couldn't contact each other, Layfon was doubtful as to whether his letter had arrived safely at Grendan. He didn't think Leerin would not want to write to him. The unreliable connection between cities, the Layfon involved in this situation, the Layfon who thought of Leerin in this time..... He arrived at this conclusion from all these factors combined.

Had the people he met in this city filled his loneliness of not being with Leerin?

No.

It didn't fill his loneliness. It replaced it. The truth of leaving Leerin remained in him. He was just so busy with school and everything that he hadn't the time to feel lonely.

This was the Layfon in Zuellni. Perhaps it was a good thing that he wasn't as tense as he was in Grendan.

(Although there's a lot of troublesome things, and I'm doing what I did before.....)

And as part of his life in Zuellni, he was out here in the open, in a desolate environment, totally isolated from his normal life.

Particles of sand beat against the vehicle and his Dites.

The wind was rising again. Listening to the sound of the wind, Layfon's consciousness sank into shallow darkness.



Time rewinds back to just after Layfon's departure.

The door was pushed open.

"Yo, Nina! Are you alright?"

"I don't think that's a question you ask a patient."

"Yep. Just like this!" Sharnid walked into the room, smiling flippantly as he winked at a nurse walking past in the corridor. Harley was right behind him.

It was the morning of a weekend. Nina put aside the book she was reading.

"What're you reading? Ugh, a textbook! And it's 'Military Arts Principles I'Why're you reading this now?"

Nina nodded as she confirmed the Dites hanging around Sharnid's waist.

"Because I have something I need to relearn."

"Ha ha, even though you fainted all of a sudden, you're still so serious," Sharnid shrugged.

"Forget it. What about today's match? Is it okay not to watch it?"

"If you want to know, I can bring you the disc later. Because of the sudden holiday, it was too abrupt to arrange a date, so I've got time on my hands."

If so, then just go and watch the match. But Nina didn't say that. Harley's smile lacked his usual cheerfulness, and that bothered her.

"But it's tragic to faint due to over-exhaustion. And you're still so serious about it after fainting; I greatly admire our captain."

".....I'm sorry," Nina apologized, lowering her head.

"No, no....." Sharnid said. "I don't want you to reflect on this. I've done that sort of thing many times already..... besides, I have something else to talk about today. Sorry I have to push back visiting the patient."

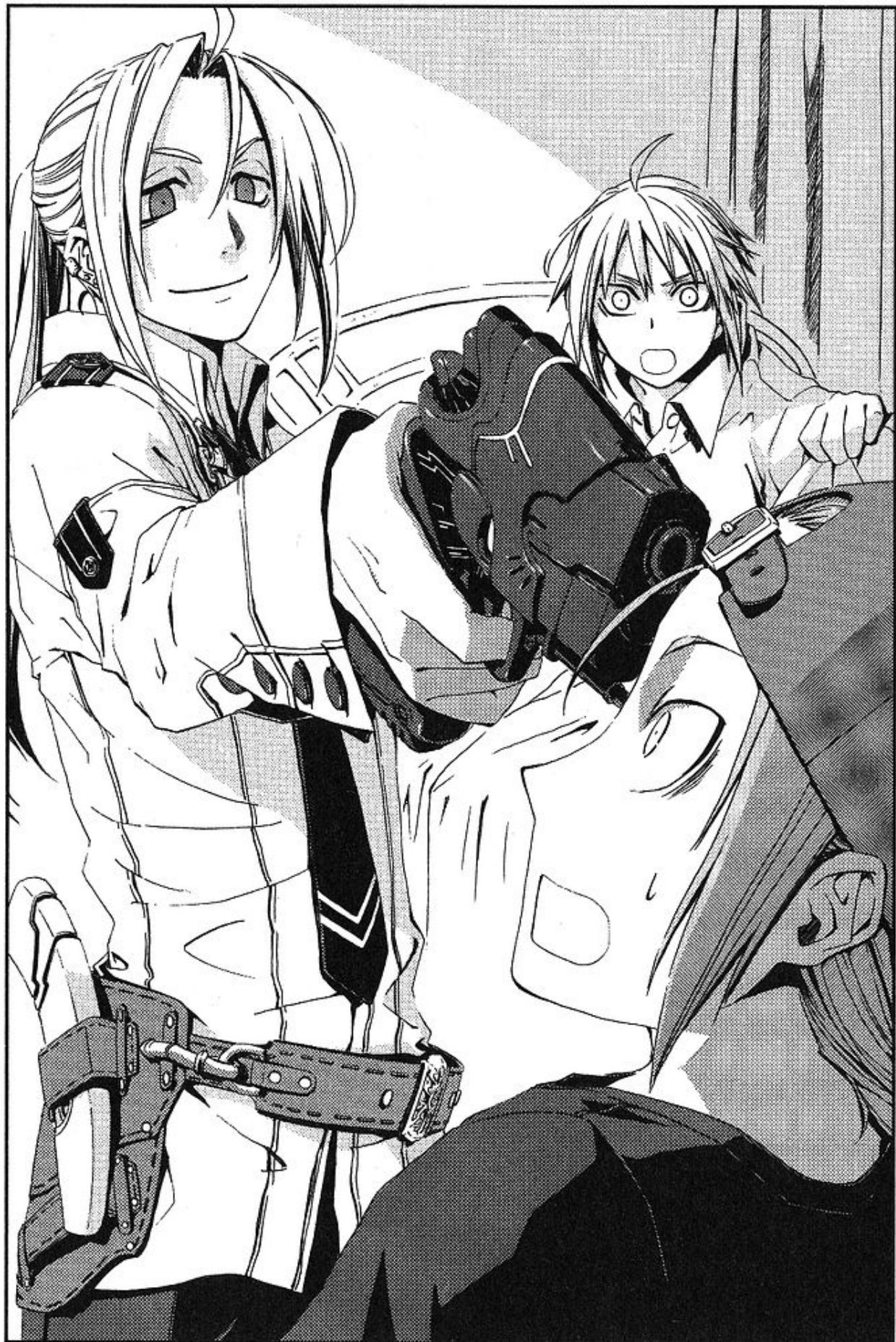
"Something else?"

Sharnid snatched up his Dite. "For someone who's not in a team, my words probably don't mean much....." He said as he deftly spun the larger-than-palm-sized Dite.

"Everyone has secrets, but there are two types: ones that don't matter, and ones that people take notice of. I don't care if it's the former type, but the latter....."

A rapid movement from him.

The Dite restored in his hand in the blink of an eye and it was pointed right at Harley.



"Sharnid!" Nina said loudly. A smile still hung on Sharnid's face. As for Harley, he was frozen stiff at the sudden Dite's appearance.

"If my comrade's keeping secrets, then I can't move freely, cause I'll worry that he'll stab me in the back. For example, whether this guy would shoot the wrong target.....Something like that," Sharnid stared closely at his Dite pressing down on Harley's forehead.

Meaning he was suspecting Harley?

"How could that be?" Nina said.

"Harley is my childhood friend. He'll never betray me."

"I don't doubt this guy's skill, and I don't think he'll betray the team, but it seems we were the only two left out."

"What?" Nina looked at Harley. Resignation filled his stiff expression.

"Harley?"

".....Sorry."

"The weapon you made in haste a while ago was for Layfon, right? That ridiculously huge sword, just what was it for?"

Nina remembered, but she had never suspected Harley. Recently, she was only thinking about herself.

"What do you guys plan for the ridiculously strong Layfon with that type of a weapon? I think I can guess. Felli's with you guys and that's enough confirmation. But if it's possible, I want to hear it from you."

Nina kept silent.

"Sorry," Harley's lips were clamped tight against each other.

Slightly shaky lips opened again.

Nina had forgotten her own breathing, and the same feeling remained with her as she listened.

After that.....

The nurse went in to deliver lunch, and seeing the bed empty, she ran out into the corridor.



Layfon arrived at his destination shortly after noon.

He drank down protein paste with a straw, and confirmed the information conveyed through Felli's flake.

The high and jutting mountain gave off an unapproachable bearing.

The scene appeared on his helmet.

The inert filth monster was fastened onto the surface of the mountain, its posture almost the same as the image in the second photo. The filth monster's body had slightly expanded. Its length, from head to tail, was long like a snake's. Two insect-like wings extended from its back. Muddy green veins spread across the tattered wings, which were weakened to such an extent that they were bent, almost broken off, by the wind.

Legs were attached to the curled body of the filth monster, and the claws of the forelegs weren't dug into the wall of the mountain. The filth monster must be degenerating. A thin layer of white covered its green compound eye.

The prey whose nutritive value was much higher than the pollutants...the filth monster made no reaction to the prey, the human standing within reach.

As if it was dead.

But what about the sudden chill he felt?

"How is it?" Felli said.

"A Phase 4 or 5 male. I can tell that from its shriveled legs."

"Is it that thing in the photo?"

"The filth monsters lose their legs every time they molt.....Uh, females are different. They stay underground when they're laying eggs."

He dismounted the bike and took out two Dites from his harness.

In his right hand was the special Dite that Harley made.

"When its body's grown old, its legs will completely degenerate. This is the mature phase. Once the male fully degenerates, it'll be able to fly, and that is its cruellest and wildest form. Next is the second maturation phase with increasing functions and variations. The form of a Phase 2 is never stable."

"Fon Fon?"

Leaning stiffly against the bike, he tried to relax his body. It was meaningless to get anxious now. He allowed his Kei to run through his body.

"Just like its unstable appearance, it's also hard to judge the filth monster's level of strength. We have to be particularly wary of Phase 2 filth monsters. If this filth monster is in its first phase, then there're still ways to handle it."

"What are they?" Incomprehension seeped through Felli's voice, but Layfon wasn't paying attention.

"A Phase 2 filth monster is rare, so perhaps there's no need to be concerned, or it's simply not possible to recognize it. But there is a difference between knowing and not knowing. If one knows, then one can take appropriate action. Please remember, sometimes Phase 2 filth monsters don't attack humans because they've learned to be more than simply violent."

"Fon Fon.....What're you saying?"

"Something that might be my last words."

Cracking noises. As if the air was rent apart. A loud noise hiding the sound of a secret's breath. The chill on Layfon's skin turned into needle sharp pain. As the noise increased in intensity, the tattered wings collapsed and the scales covering the filth monster's body peeled off in flakes. The entire compound eye popped out and rolled down the side of the mountain.

Felli's voice intruded. "I've got a report.....Zuellni's changed direction. The entire city's made a rapid turn."

"As expected....."

Now he knew why Zuellni kept moving straight before. The city hadn't discovered the filth monster, or maybe it thought it was only a corpse. In the end, Zuellni found out it wasn't that at all, so it changed its route.

"Fon Fon.....This is....."

"It's molting. This is my first time seeing this, but it has to be that."

"Zuellni's changed direction.....Please escape!"

Layfon ignored her. "Restoration 01," he said the key word, restoring the Dite in his left hand. The Sapphire Dite's blade tore through the air.

"It's too late. This guy was waiting. After molting.....It holds a different body type and will get hungrier than usual. It was suppressing its molting moment until the prey got too close. The reason why a Mature Phase filth monster is particularly aggressive is because of its extreme hunger."

It was too late for Layfon to escape. The filth monster had waited for the smell of prey to get close, to the point where it couldn't escape. Layfon readied his fighting stance and increased the amount and density of his Internal Kei. The back of the monster split into two and sticky body fluid oozed from it, down the face of the mountain in many branches.

Low howling made the air vibrate. The filth monster announced its rebirth, lifting itself from the empty shell to spread its pure and moisture-filled wings. The intense red of the wings stained the sky.

The liquid covering its head fell off, revealing a head different from before. A long protruding jaw, sharp teeth on the outside, diamond blue light like a human's eyes.....It looked very similar to an insect.

"Phase 1.....Please remember. You can defeat this monster if you are prepared to sacrifice half a city."

He connected the end of the restored Dite to the end of the other Dite in his right hand. He grasped hold of the connected Dites carefully with his right hand then charged forward.

Internal-type Kei – Whirl Kei.

Strengthening his feet, he leaped onto the face of the mountain.

The monster's wings vibrated as the liquid enveloping its body shot out, painting rainbows around it. It must have caught the scent of countless humans in Zuellni. The filth monster's nose pointed directly behind Layfon.

The steel threads bounded up the entire filth monster, the action quiet as a mouse.

The filth monster kept on ascending without signs of slowing. The difference between their two sizes was too huge. Unable to suppress his opponent, Layfon was lifted up to dangle in midair.

(If it were Lintence, he could cut off its wings like this.....)

As expected, its shell was much harder than a larva's.....He wondered how Nina and the others would think of him if they saw him like this.....As he returned his attention to the current situation, he focused on binding the monster tighter.

Intense vibration shot down his wrist. The wings beat fast and rapid, and the steel threads bounced off them.

"It still isn't working....."

Layfon didn't have the time to try another tactic and aim at the base of the wings. The filth monster was now in the air and it could head for Zuellni whenever it wanted. Layfon let the steel threads loose into two bundles; one binding the filth monster, the other shot into the face of the mountain.

"I'll have it land."

The monster rumbled in pain. Its body twisted and its wings danced more intensely, but the monster failed to ascend. At the same time, keen wailing came from the mountain.

Layfon removed the part of the combined Dite that was anchoring the steel threads in the mountain, then twisted in midair to land on one of the steel threads and ran across it, his face green and stiff, as if he was performing in a circus. While running, he took out the rest of the Dites from his harness and inserted them into the holes in Harley's Dite.

"Restoration AD," he said as Kei flowed through his entire body.

Heavy weight burst out from him at the weight of the weapon and the power flowing in his body. The steel thread dipped, and he used the momentum of its rebound to jump up to the filth monster's back.

A huge blade was born in Layfon's hand.

Three different types of Dites.....Combined with a Dite that was already an amalgamation of different alloys. This feat wasn't possible before.

But the end product was just a different type of Dite. It wasn't particularly special in any way.

The new Dite maintained and combined all the advantages of three types of Dite. There was a disadvantage though. It wasn't possible to reduce the weight and density of the restored forms of the three types of Dites, so Layfon was practically holding four weapons.

Any normal person would have had trouble controlling that weight.

He landed on its back. Using his left wrist, he reeled in a steel thread anchored in the mountain, all the time running, dragging the huge blade with him.

His targets were the wings.

He headed for the left wing. Furious winds buffeted him, but he shot through them using Internal Kei. He raised the sword and chopped down. The red of the wing scattered. The monster howled, not in pain, as the wing had no nerves, but because it lost its balance.

The filth monster sloped to one side. Layfon released the sword and retrieved it using a steel thread. Letting loose the steel thread looped around his left wrist, he ran up the back of the monster.

He jumped and descended. He had wanted to shoot out a steel thread to reduce his falling speed, but there wasn't anything above him to latch onto.

A shock wave on the ground signaled the filth monster's landing. The wind rolled back from the monster and caught some of Layfon's weight as he landed.

The filth monster struggled to its feet. Blood filled its raging eye as it watched Layfon, the small creature who was interfering with its dinner. Its starving and furious gaze seemed to be enough to stop a person's heart.

"How long does it take to regenerate your wing? Two days? Three? As long as there's a big enough gap, then Zuellni can escape....." Layfon murmured, feeling the wetness coming from inside his armor-suit.

He was sweating profusely.

The murderous intent of a Phase 1 filth monster was this amazing.

But more focus than that was needed for him to cut off its wing.

"How long will it take you to die of hunger? One week? Or one month? I'll play with you no matter how long it takes."

The filth monster had used up all of its stored nutrients to enter the first maturity phase. It didn't have enough strength to molt a second time.

Layfon couldn't run. This thought caused his stubbornness to lift its head, and that was enough indication of his collapsing will to fight. If this continued, an opening would appear for the teeth of the filth monster to sink into.

The monster headed straight for Layfon, its body waving away the clouds of dust and its movements generating more dust. It had no legs as it had already given them up in the molting process, but its snake-like movements were fast even without legs.

This huge body of the filth monster in itself was a weapon, its every scale hard and sharp. Even if it didn't make direct contact with Layfon, a brush with it could tear open Layfon's armor-suit.

Although Layfon had taken away the opponent's advantage by forcing it to move on the ground, he himself was still at a disadvantage.

"Fon Fon....."

Layfon leaped back into the close pressure of death.



"I think if it's him, he can do it.....I admit I didn't consider fully in my passion to invent the new Dite, but I really think he can do it!"

Harley's voice hovered in Nina's mind.

The sound of the running bike shook her entire body. The sun shone overhead. The temperature should be cold, but she felt hot. This must be because of the armor-suit.

Seated in the sidecar with nothing to do but sit still, she wasn't at all impatient and anxious because.....

"But looking at him, I thought I might have been wrong. Layfon - He, how should I put it.....He was very serious. Of course he'd have such a reaction

encountering this event. He has to fight a filth monster alone.....His reaction is natural, but I don't feel that that's the only reason."

The bike flew across the earth.

Sharnid was the driver. Only one set of armor-suit had been improved, so Nina and Sharnid wore the old type of armor-suit. They had worn it once when they were on a training mission outside the city. This old type restricted the body's movements, but it was better than wearing nothing.

But even if she could move more deftly, what could the present Nina do?

After listening to Harley, Nina went to find Karian at the office of the Student President. He received her with an expression free of guilt.

"Just what is this?!" Nina said angrily.

"Nothing. Layfon-kun said he doesn't need any help. I believe in him. Believing is different from abandoning."

Nina's fist pounded down on the desk. The documents rose an inch and the pen holder swayed. The fountain pen next to the documents rolled to the side.

Her hand hurt.

".....He also said, don't let anyone get close."

"Huh?"

Picking up the pen which was about to fall off, Karian turned it about skillfully with his fingers.

"It seems a fight with a filth monster is dangerous. I can't tell how dangerous since I'm not a Military Artist, but it seems that one would die while looking for somewhere safe. He said he doesn't need anyone to wait for orders in a safety zone in that type of battlefield. There are only two outcomes in a battle with filth monsters outside a city – either come back alive, or die. He said we better be mentally prepared....."

Nina held her breath. That was all she could do.

Layfon was all alone out there.....

Her fist tightened on the desk. Her muscles still hurt. Her condition was hardly normal in this present state. If she tried to generate a Kei flow, her waist would hurt painfully.

What could she do in this situation?

But she couldn't stop herself.

"Please let me go."

"And what do you plan to do there?" Karian's question was reasonable. "I understand your condition. Even if I don't know the details, as President, I can't allow a pale-faced student to enter that dangerous a place."

"He's my subordinate and my comrade. Even if we can't fight together, at least let me go and rescue him....."

She didn't know what she could do to help out.

But when she said "comrade", she could imagine Layfon's genuine smile.

"Mmm.....Okay. I'll give you permission to use a bike. My sister will guide you."

"Thank you."

"But you must come back alive. Escape immediately if the situation turns bad."

".....I won't run away."

"You people are the only ones who can keep this city alive."

"Layfon's the same," Nina said and ran out of the room.

She was now riding the bike. The problem was, what could she do to help?

Only a few days ago.....Layfon was alone, pondering on how to fight the filth monster without telling anyone. Facing the current him like that, what could she do?

She and Layfon differed in strength and experiences, but fighting as a platoon and fighting the filth monsters were different things.

Even so, she couldn't continue her normal daily life not knowing what was going on outside.

Didn't Sharnid say that there were two types of secrets? Ones that mattered and ones that didn't?

This was a secret she was concerned about. She couldn't stay hidden in the dark.

(We aren't the only ones who want you to live.)

The sender of that letter must feel the same. That letter was written with ease, worry and jealousy. It was clear that the girl felt something for Layfon. To leave this person behind in a place where only one choice, life or death, was possible.....Just what was Layfon thinking?

(Perhaps that's what she meant by "difference?")

Pain rose in Nina's chest. Was this what Leerin meant when she said in the letter that she was happy Layfon didn't give up the Military Arts but she didn't want him to become the Layfon of Grendan?

Thinking of this, a tightness spread through Nina's chest.

(Aaah!)

She chased away the uneasiness inside her. What she wanted to know wasn't how much Leerin knew of Layfon, but what Layfon's true intention was in this fight.

For him to head alone into this kind of a place.

Even if it was the fate that no Military Artist could escape from.

She didn't know what to do if she failed to find out.

(Just what is he thinking.....)

And.....

(What do I do after I find out?)

If she didn't understand that either, she felt she had no way to move forward.

Did this concern belong to the future? Or was it because of her present self.....She wasn't too clear on the question itself.

".....You're almost there," Felli's voice came through.

Fatigue came through Felli's voice. Nina never knew Felli's psychokinesis could reach this far. This made her acknowledge once more just how ignorant she was of her team members' strength.

(I'll think about that later.....)

"What is it?"

"Hey, over there....." Sharnid said before Felli did. He shook his head and pointed ahead.

The bike entered a dust cloud.

And this was what Nina saw after a while.

The deserted ground looked as if someone had been madly slashing at it, and in that ground laid a huge, deep gutter. The sand and dust fluttering around were proof of it.

A lone shadow had fallen inside that gutter.

Nina's hand pressed down on her chest, her heart tightened.

Sharnid slowed down the bike, heading towards the dark shadow.

It was the bike that Layfon had taken with him, but Layfon himself was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he.....?" She couldn't see properly through the dancing sand, but something was certain.

She didn't get it. The mountain where the filth monster had fastened itself onto should be right ahead of them. But it was gone.

"Felli, where's Layfon?"

Felli didn't reply.

They were already one day late. Was Layfon all right?

"Answer me. Is he all right?"

"He's okay, but....."

"But...? What is it?"

"He said don't get closer. Run far away."

"What did you say?"

And the sound of some distant explosion filled her eardrums, and she saw a dark shape spattering the sky.

A huge rock was descending towards Nina and Sharnid.



In an instant, his concentration broke.

Something had happened, but he had immediately focused back on the task before him.

It seemed to be some information.....And he had shouted out something in panic.

The break in concentration was almost fatal.

Layfon didn't have time to remember it. He didn't dig through his memories as he had no time to think or do anything extraneous outside the battle.

Because if he did that, then death awaited him.

The huge monster filled Layfon's entire vision. It roared as its body batted at Layfon. The steel threads flew at the filth monster's tail and wrapped around it. The tail thrashed, pulling Layfon up and down, as if Layfon was a fish struggling off a hook.

When Layfon stopped spinning, he lowered himself – His destination was the filth monster's head.

The filth monster seemed wounded. It seemed to have been buried quite deep, and it still hadn't managed to shake loose the rubble on top of it.

The huge sword chopped down towards its body.

The scales resisted the sword point, but in one swift movement, Layfon had pierced through the tough outer-shell - only to feel yet another resistance, another layer of scales.

"!"

It was one layer after another. Every time the sword hit a scale, sparks lit up. Bathed in a shower of sparks, Layfon realized he had failed. His usual self could have torn through the monster like it was paper.....But why couldn't he do it?

At this rate, the filth monster's flesh would have swallowed Layfon's blade. Before that happened, Layfon had turned the blade around. He grasped hold of the handle again and put his foot on the monster's back. He pulled the steel threads to confirm they were anchored about one Jimel ahead of him in the mountain face, then he 'pulled' again as he kicked at the monster's back. As Layfon was torn skyward, the huge blade leaped out of the flesh. Red blood sprayed from the filth monster's wound.

Layfon landed on the ground.

He turned around quickly to face the monster and he looked down at the Dite.

Smoke rose from one of the Dites inserted into the three holes. A closer look revealed small cracks along the Dite. Its color also looked different.

"One's broken....."

He took out that Dite and tossed it away.

Although the Dite had the strength to maintain its form, that strength was limited. It had managed to hang on till now because of its high density, but now it was broken.

The combined Dite felt lighter in his hand. This different feel might cause the next fatal error, but he couldn't stop fighting.

He watched the filth monster.

Many scales had fallen off its body. Blood spurted from its wound. It had lost too much blood. Slabs of something black fell off from its body.

It had also lost half of its remaining wing. To Layfon, the filth monster looked like a gigantic snake prostrated on the ground.....But the scales covering its body weren't as smooth as a snake's. They were as tough and sharp as rocks.

Layfon had destroyed its left eye. The blood flow seeping from under that shattered eye had slowed. The wound must be recovering. Layfon didn't

know whether the filth monster would regenerate the nerves in its eyes. He had no wish to find out.

So hot.....The ventilation function of the armor-suit had reached its limit. Layfon's sweat became steam.

He knew his concentration was slipping.

"Damn!"

He renewed his focus. He wanted to defeat this monster without sustaining any injuries. While doing that was nearly impossible, how could he get distracted?

He didn't plan to die. Although he did say something to Felli that might be his last words, still, it was just a possibility. He hadn't had time to talk with her properly since the fight began. As for last words.....All he needed was to smile after returning safely to Zuellni.

The filth monster struggled to get up. It must be because of the heavy wound in its head. The monster didn't seem to know where it was while its anger increased with every passing second. Its rough and wild movements sent sand flying everywhere, and the various wounds on its body sprayed out more blood.

(I'll rest a little before it finds out where I am.)

Layfon didn't know how much time he'd get to rest. He might not even have one minute, but all he needed was a gap in the fight so he could generate more Kei and let it fill his body. It was painful that he had nothing to replace the water and salt he had lost. He licked his lip and tasted something salty – his sweat.

"Fon Fon.....Can you talk?"

How long had it been since he last heard her?

"Ahah.....How long has it been?"

"About a day."

"I see....."

(I should be able to stay up for two more days without water.)

He thought as he watched the filth monster. It hadn't discovered him yet.

"And.....?"

"Well.....It's about the captain."

"The captain? What's happened to her?"

".....I said before that the captain and Sharnid-senpai are heading this way. Though you said they were to retreat.....Don't you remember?"

Now he knew why he had lost his concentration.

"Ah.....Sorry, I don't. Did they retreat?"

The astonishment back then felt so far away from him. Felli's question wasn't because she doubted him. She said it out of obligation.

Although he was resting, he didn't let down his guard. He was still focused on the fight, so everything else felt far away from him.

"Well....."

He had no time to listen to her.

It had discovered him.

What should he do?

He felt uneasy at the lighter weight of the Dite, but it wasn't just because he had lost one of the Dites. The clumsy feel of the Kei flow indicated that the combined Dites themselves had sustained a certain level of damage after a fight that lasted one entire day.

(How many moves can I still execute?)

Compared to his physical strength, the weapon itself might be the first to fail. This wouldn't have happened if he had the Heaven's Blade with him.

Fighting to his limit, he realized for the first time how rare and valuable the Heaven's Blade was. That was strange. Did he not have the vision to understand that?

"It's useless to make excuses."

He had decided what he had to do. In that case, all he needed to do was finish his duty.

He would defeat the filth monster with one move, so he must find an opening.

As he thought of this, the enemy made a peculiar movement.

"Uh.....?"

It didn't seem like it intended to attack him. Almost as if it was getting distracted.

Layfon followed it.....And his concentration broke again.

A small dust cloud. A bike with a sidecar.....It wasn't the one that Layfon rode on.

Yes, the filth monster was looking at it.

"How could they come here!?"

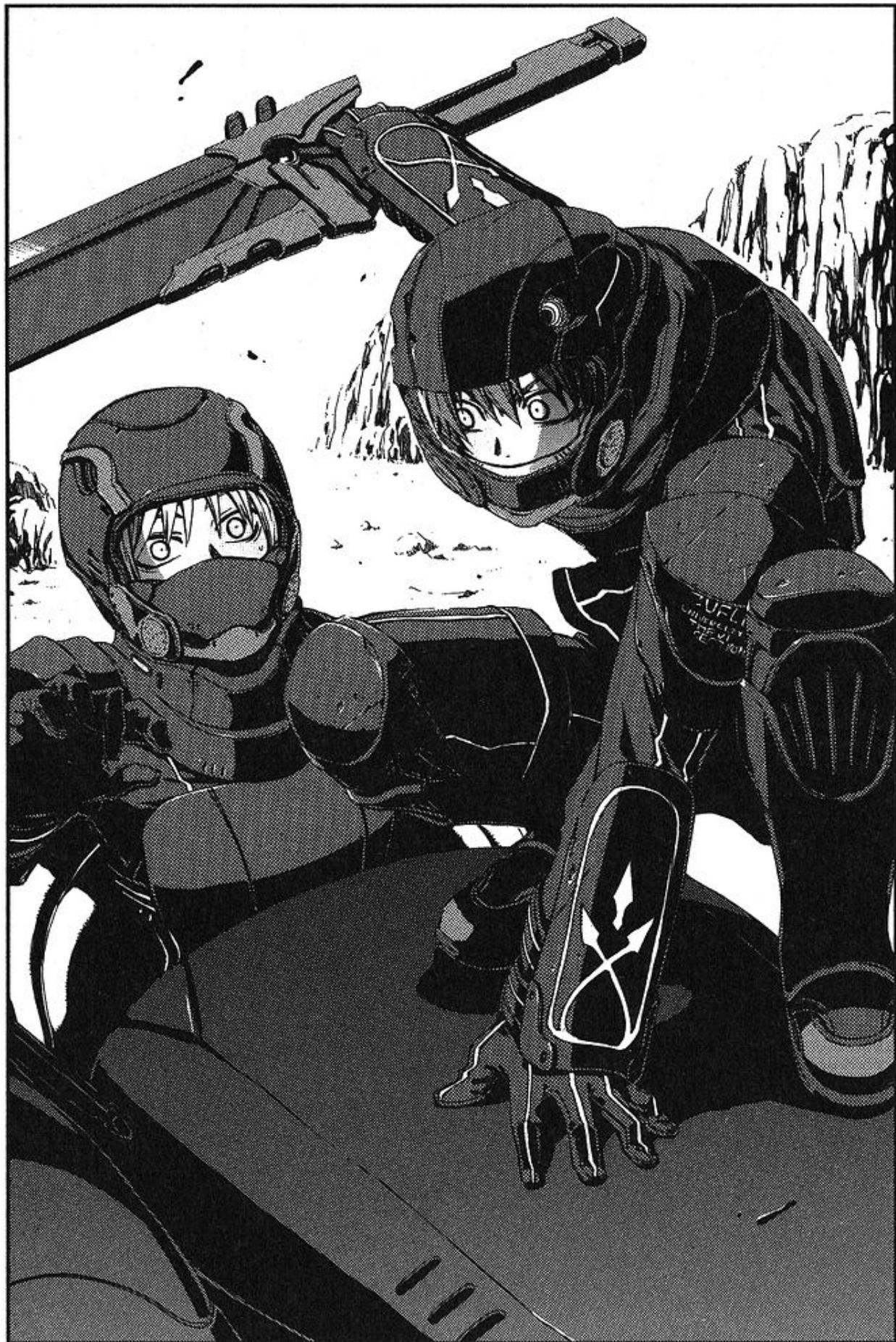
Although he couldn't tell who they were as they were wearing armor-suits, he was sure they were Nina and Sharnid.

He leaped up to a steel thread and ran towards them, using Whirl Kei.

Sharnid's shower of bullets had little effect on the filth monster. As Layfon passed their position, he felt Nina's eyes stabbing his face. Perhaps he was being oversensitive. And like that, he appeared in front of the filth monster. His body suddenly bounded upwards.

Flying in the air, supported by the steel thread, Layfon turned the huge sword around and swung down to cut open the monster's forehead.

He flew back as blood mixed with a howling noise shot high into the air. Layfon landed on the moving bike.



"Layfon!?"

"Why are you here!?" he asked angrily and looked back at the filth monster.

It was on a rampage as the pain twisted its long body. The feeling in Layfon's hand told him he had failed in delivering a fatal strike to the brain.

And.....

He looked at his Dite. Smoke rose from another hole. That couldn't be helped as he had tried to cut through the already tough scales along with the even harder forehead bone.

(The strike I have left.....)

Feeling the lightness of the weapon, he made his decision.

(Then what?)

He still had his own green Dite that he could use to buy time. He had been using its steel threads as support so it hadn't sustained any heavy damage. But if he used his last move, he'd forego the steel threads move that had helped him escape countless times. Losing that option would be a huge setback for him.

Perhaps this was better than losing his chance to attack, but he would be forcing himself into a dead end. Buying time would ensure Zuellni could move to safety, but if he did that, he'd lose his life.

And there were also Nina and Sharnid.....

This was the only way.....To determine the outcome of the fight before he lost use of the steel threads.

And it was a highly dangerous gamble. If he failed, he'd die, Nina and Sharnid would die, Zuellni might also die. Everything would vanish.

Should he bet everything on the last move.....He hesitated.

"Hey, are you listening?"

"No.....Anyway, you guys hurry up and escape."

"Listen up! Your bike's broken. This is the only vehicle that still works."

"As long as I beat this guy, people will come to get me."

"Can you defeat it?"

"....."

"That weapon's at its limit. Can you really beat it with this thing?"

".....It's starting to move. I have to go!"

He had no answer for her. He hadn't the confidence that she'd agree with his answer. His only reply was to head out and fight.

Sharnid pulled him back by his collar, steering the bike with one hand.

"Aaah, wait!"

"Please let go of me!"

"It's rare for the captain to order others to listen to her."

"I'll use force."

"It's fine if you tear off my arm. Please go ahead."

In reality, if he pulled himself out of Sharnid's grasp with Kei, he really might just end up tearing Sharnid's arm off. And even if that didn't happen, the bike might lose its balance and flip over.

"It's too embarrassing to come out here and not do anything. That's how it is for me, and the same goes for the injured captain. The 17th platoon can't embarrass its captain!"

"I hadn't heard that order before."

"Same here. I just made that decision."

By looking at Sharnid's back, Layfon could tell he was smiling.

"Have you got a plan?" Nina said. "Are you absolutely sure that you can win with your next move?"

She had even seen through this.

".....Yes. It's the wound on its forehead. If I strike there again....."

The scales were shattered. Half of the forehead bone was probably cracked.....If he struck there.

The wound must be healing, but not the scales and the bone. If he could stab its brain and release his Kei there.....But Nina had calmly pointed out the uneasiness he felt about that move.

"Do you have a plan that can take you there and make sure you strike it on its head?"

"....."

"Okay." Nina nodded. "Then we've increased our chance of success."

"Heh?"

"You were listening in, Felli? Find the setting I want nearby. Hurry."

Then Nina listed out her conditions of the place she had in mind.

"It's near. Head southwest. It's about 20 Jimels from you."

"Sharnid."

"Roger, captain." He changed the bike's direction.

"Layfon, will the filth monster leave us?"

"Huh?.....Probably not. It moves faster than this bike."

"Then buy enough time for us to head for that place. Don't damage your weapon."

"With this....."

He could interfere with the filth monster's movements using the steel threads.

"Keep at it."

He nodded reflexively.

How should he put it? It was a feeling of suddenly being swallowed. He saw Nina's face through the helmet and the armor-suit.....He looked at that face and the tension he held wavered.

He felt more at ease.

Should he be comforted by the wavering of the destructive pressure on him? Or be alarmed at it.....He wasn't sure. Even so, he felt a part of him wasn't able to deny Nina.

He continued to control the steel threads.

Twenty Jimels.

He focused on buying them time.



They arrived at a valley surrounded by cliff faces. Green plants and clear water might have once flourished here. Now the valley was dry, extremely dry.

Nina had explained her plan as they rode the bike. They looked back at the slope, as if waiting for something to fly into its mouth.

"How long till that guy catches up?"

"Three minutes."

Nina nodded. "We're getting off. It's impossible to drive the bike here. Sharnid, take the bike to the firing position. Layfon, carry me."

Felli explained the terrain and Nina asked a few questions based on Felli's information. It seemed just by doing that, she had already formed an accurate map in her head. Layfon dismounted, clear about the instructions he had received.

The sound of shattering rocks came closer.

The filth monster was already here.

"Hurry!"

Layfon carried her deeper into the valley.

"Is this really all right?" he asked, uncomfortable with how light she was in his arms.

"The plan will be successful as long as that thing stops moving, right?"

Layfon nodded on the bike.

"It's hungry, so it'll rush straight for food, right?"

Layfon nodded again.

"Well, all we need is bait.....No need to think of anything else."

".....Captain?"

"Limit your enemy's movements and turn the situation into your advantage. That's a basic tactic."

"You aren't thinking of....."

"I'll act as bait. Who else can do this besides me? Sharnid's got his mission and you have to give it its fatal strike. If you do everything, including what's unnecessary, isn't that the same as what you've been doing in the past?"

"That was how I did things in Grendan."

He had always done things this way. To change his way now.....

"Weren't there many people to replace you in Grendan? Aren't there twelve Heaven's Blade Receivers? So eleven people could replace you. Even if you fall, there are still other ways, so you fought with those kinds of tactics. But nobody can replace you in Zuellni. Grendan and Zuellni are different. Grendan's way is not my way. You're my subordinate. I can't just leave you."

"But....." Layfon stopped speaking. Her determination in her eyes. Her furrowing eyebrows as if she was glaring at him, as if she was staring at him with trembling eyes...He felt he was being sucked into them.

Those eyes suddenly turned gentle.

"You want to abandon the you of Grendan, don't you?"

".....But, I can't."

Because the threat of meeting filth monsters existed everywhere.

"It's okay to abandon it."

"Heh?" His eyes widened in astonishment.

"Your desire to protect Zuellni arose after you came to the Academy City, right? Then treasure it. As for your way of fighting, living and thinking in Grendan.....leave them all. It's enough to protect Zuellni. Leave everything."

"....."

"You don't think that helps you? But, that's how I feel and how the person waiting for you in Grendan feels. Isn't that what was written in the letter?"

"Letter.....?"

"I can repeat this as many times as you want. I won't let you, my comrade and subordinate, die. I'll do whatever it takes to reach that goal!"

An intense light emitted once again from those gentle eyes. A determination that would never bend and break. Those eyes were what made him swallow his words. Looking at his image in them, Layfon nodded.

"I understand. Then, I'll hold senpai's life in my hands for a bit."

"Stop talking nonsense," she laughed. "I'm the captain. Your lives are in my hands."



Nina was all alone in the valley.

Trees once stood here. Clear water once flowed. Fish once swam, and everything must have been filled with songs of birds. Lives drowned the earth as a matter of course. The lives were short, but creatures continued to sing out the song of life's chains.

Something white was stuck to the rocks. They were probably the bones of some fish.

It was a life that failed to keep on living.

The world had shriveled up. And the reason behind that.....How did the pollutants manage to spread across the entire world? Some said it was a material created from humanity's insolence when human civilization reached its peak. Some said it just happened all of a sudden. And Nina

had heard of many other different explanations. She didn't know which was the truth, and didn't know whether there was meaning in looking back at the past. Everyone else now only lived in Regios, living under the threat of filth monsters.

Nina hated that feeling. Couldn't something be done? She wanted to do something about it.

She hated herself for being born into a narrow world. She wanted to see other worlds. It didn't matter if it was just a tiny outside world, and so she had come to Zuellni. But she still understood how useless she was, even though she had reached Zuellni. She understood more of the cruelty of this world and her own insignificance, her own weakness.

Surviving in this world, what she should do, what she could do.....

She wanted to keep on living.

And to survive, she must become stronger. Because she lived in this kind of world, she must become stronger. Because heaven blessed her with the power of Kei, she must become stronger. That was what she thought.

Except for a small failure.

She didn't think she was entirely in the wrong. She just didn't use the correct way. And now, the Layfon who corrected her was making the same mistake.

To Nina, Layfon's mistake was a small failure on his part, since he didn't know where he stood. In that case, she had to wake him up.

The rumbling closed in.

It was the filth monster, the existence on the very top of the pyramid. Covered in wounds, the creature headed towards Nina, driven by nothing but hunger.

Compared to the injuries that Layfon had sustained.....If Layfon and the filth monster kept on fighting, which side would win?

She recalled she had been pondering on what the strongest existence was not long ago. Filth monsters lived in a larger world than humans, a world that humans could not enter without protection. On this level, the filth monsters were the strongest.

In the filth monster's starving stage, fighting for the most basic requirement of life, pollutants weren't enough for it.

So it had to eat humans.

Compared to this creature, humans lived in their own worlds without having to worry about food. Looking from this perspective, just who was stronger?

"What boring thinking."

The dominating presence neared Nina, its gaze piercing her like teeth. She couldn't help but imagine her tiny body being crushed by those sharp and gigantic teeth, her organs rolling on the tongue of the massive monster.

"Is this the world that he sees....."

Facing this horror alone, Nina's legs shook. The present her who was unable to use Kei was too weak. Besides, even if she could use Kei, what could she do? This must be the decisive gap in strength between humanity and filth monsters.

Layfon had been facing this type of creature all alone.

"I won't let you do this alone from now on," she said to the subordinate who was nowhere beside her.

But he should be able to hear her.

"You have me and your comrades."

A sound.

A tiny sound compared to the rumbling of the filth monster, but it echoed in the sky and in Nina's ears.

One side of the cliff face suddenly collapsed.

Caused by Sharnid's sniping.

The sudden avalanche of rocks, sand and soil descended on the filth monster and towards Nina. The creature howled anew.

Nina's body shot upward.

A long thin thread.....A steel thread was wrapped around her body. She saw him as she was pulled up.

A figure that brushed past her, descending rapidly.....Layfon.

He plunged straight for the trapped enemy, his ravaged sword pointing downward.

Nina confirmed her plan was successful.

Epilogue

I sent you a few letters all at once. I think I understand some of your feelings now. For some reason, I really want to read your response. But what separates us is something that can't be easily overcome.....It makes me impatient. Back then, I could hear from you immediately, but now I have to wait until letters get through.

I told you before that my days were pretty ordinary, but I have to study a lot, so it's not that easy. Did you read my last letter?

I'm writing this after the last roaming bus has left, so I think my last letter should have reached you before you read this. But perhaps you'll get this letter first. Who knows?

Recently, I've been having a recurring dream. It's about a more grown-up you and I, living together in the orphanage. I have to wake you up in the morning and make breakfast for everyone. Layfon would help out at Father's dojo and I'd walk around in a suit.....A small dream of the future. Just before I wake up, I'd see Layfon leaving, wearing the white and silver uniform of a Heaven's Blade Receiver. It makes me sad.

I liked the Layfon who trained in Military Arts, but not the Layfon who was a Heaven's Blade Receiver. I'm proud of the heroic Layfon who fought for everyone, but I didn't like Layfon going to such dangerous places alone.

I know I'm spoiled, but my wish for Layfon not to do anything dangerous is real.

I understand a bit more of your situation in Zuellni through your letters. In Grendan, it's hard for us to imagine a threat besides that of filth monsters, but it's possible that we might die from this other threat.

Do your best in the Military Arts Competition, but I hope you don't do your best when fighting filth monsters. You can't not do your best when fighting filth monsters..... I think that's what you'd say. You'd say, there's no such thing as doing your best or not when you face a life and death situation.

Yeah, I know.

But, please don't do your best. What a headache. I'm not sure how to explain this! I'm rewriting the last part of this letter.

I hope Layfon can come back to Grendan. Yeah, that's what I want to say. It's okay if you don't come back as a Military Artist. Anything's fine. I just want Layfon to come back. Six years is a long time, but if Layfon decides to return, then I'll wait for you.

I'll wait and write to you during this time, though I don't know whether letters can bridge the far distance between us.

That's all.

To my dear Layfon Wolfstein Alseif.

Leerin Marfes



"Aah.....This is a piece of crap," Sharnid complained.

"Don't say that. It's managed to come this far," Nina said, but she wasn't sure whether her evaluation was right, as this was her first time being so far away from Zuellni. The bike had stopped in the middle of nowhere.

"At a time like this, we should be returning in victory. You won't ever see this kind of scene in a movie."

"This isn't a movie. It's life. Forget about that; if we don't hurry up, we won't get back before sunset. And we've eaten all the food."

"If that's what you think, why not come and help?"

"You want a patient to work? What a terrible man you are."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll do it, captain."

"Mm." Nina nodded.

Sitting on the spare tire, Sharnid lowered his shoulders and sighed. He was changing the tire. Nina sat on a nearby boulder and watched him work.

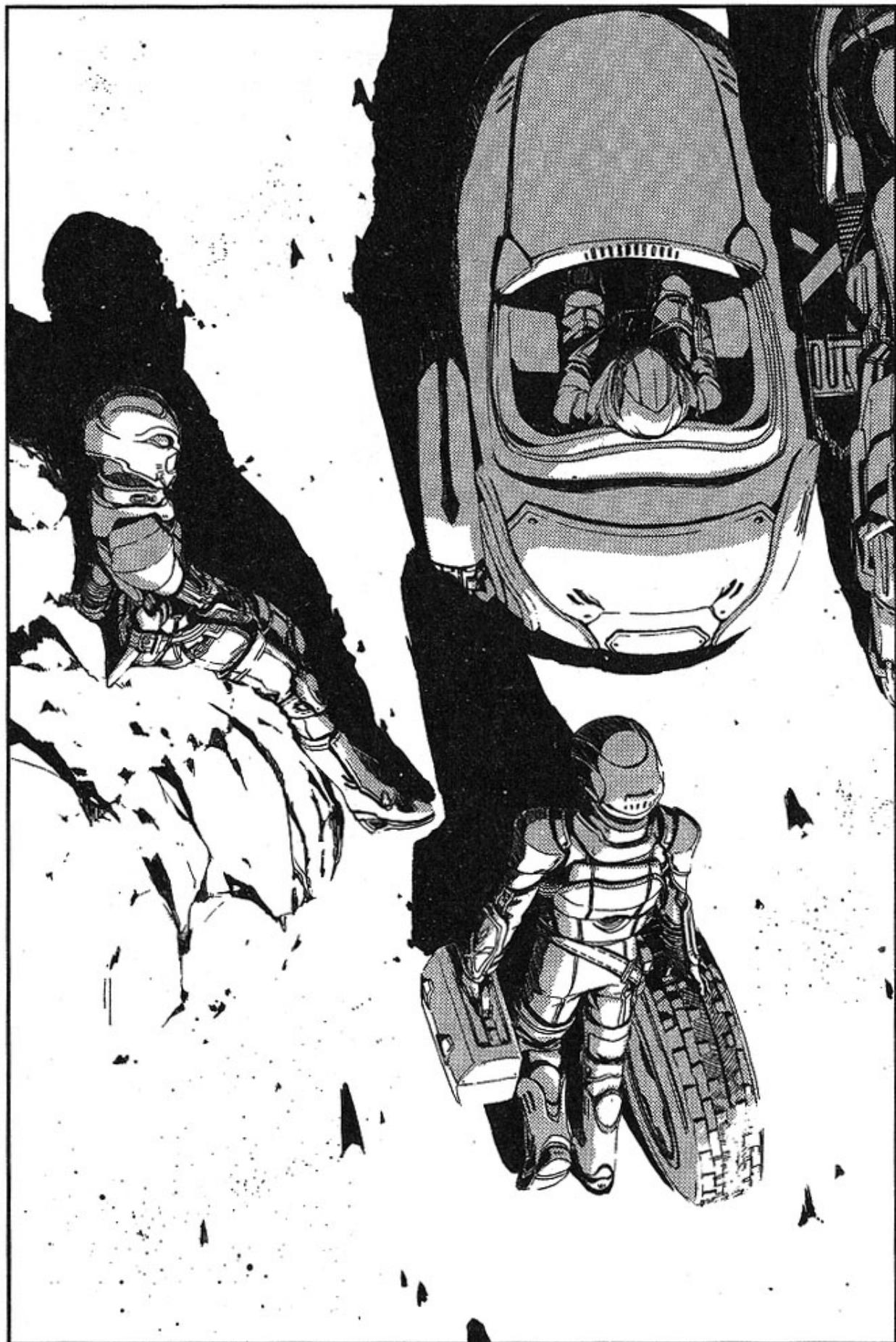
"This guy can really sleep.....Geez, I've got to do everything."

"Don't say that; he's really tired," Nina smiled.

Layfon.....wasn't moving in the passenger's seat. He was sleeping. He was exhausted.....Of course. He had been fighting the filth monster for an entire day. He must have overexerted himself.

"Let him rest."

".....Be grateful to our kind captain."



"Yeah," Nina smiled again and looked at Layfon. Both layers of his armor suit were dirty and covered in sand. Who knew what expression he wore while he slept? Nina couldn't tell because of Layfon's helmet. Was he dreaming? If so, what was he dreaming about? About...the sender of that letter? She waved away that thought.

"This guy.....Is really abnormal in many ways."

He wanted to solve everything himself. Whether it was the past that Nina had heard of, or the things he encountered in Zuellni. She told him back in the valley to abandon those things, but could Layfon do that? Although he wasn't that old, what she said to abandon dominated a large part of his personality. It wouldn't be that easy to abandon everything. He would do something similar again.

(If that happens, I'll just stop him again.)

Because Nina was his captain.....

"I really don't know what to do with him."

She smiled again and realized Sharnid was looking at her.

"What?"

"Nothing.....You really think a lot of him, so maybe the captain likes younger guys."

"How's that possible....." She smiled and shook her head. It must be because she was tired too.

"He's my subordinate and comrade. His position in our relationship won't go higher or lower."

Sharnid shrugged. "No fun at all." He screwed the spare tire in place.

She looked at him and turned her gaze back to the sleeping Layfon, her subordinate and comrade.

".....That's all there is to it."

The tiny pain she felt when reading the letter.....

Nina's words disappeared under her armor-suit without an echo.

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